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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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FEATURING

WAR OF THE WASTELANDS

a Jim Hatfield novel

By JACKSON COLE

CABALLERO OF THE COLORADO

By HAROLD PREECE

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VOLUME 42, NUMBER 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION APRIL, 1951

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Jackson Cole

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LONG SAM CORRECTS A MISTAKE.....*Lee Bond* 54
Slickered killers find out that the lanky avenger's too slick to handle

WE SHAPED THE LAND WITH OUR GUNS.....*Louis L'Amour* 66
"Get out or die!" was the order—but Rye Tyler and his partner stayed

TROUBLE SHOOTER.....*Sam Brant* 85
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RED SUNDOWN IN GRAY GULCH.....*Hal White* 89
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FEATURES

THE FRONTIER POST (A Department).....*Captain Starr* 6
SAGEBRUSH SAVVY (Questions and Answers).....*S. Omar Barker* 65
CABALLERO OF THE COLORADO (A True Story).....*Harold Preece* 79

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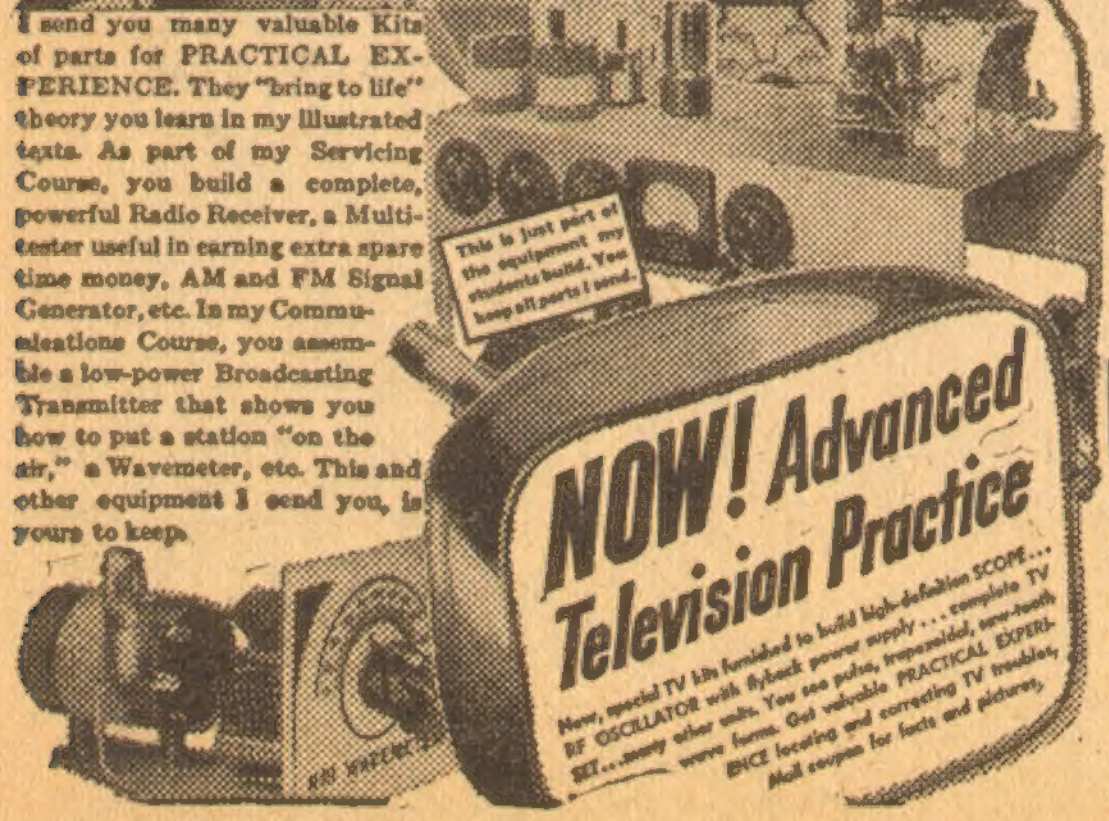
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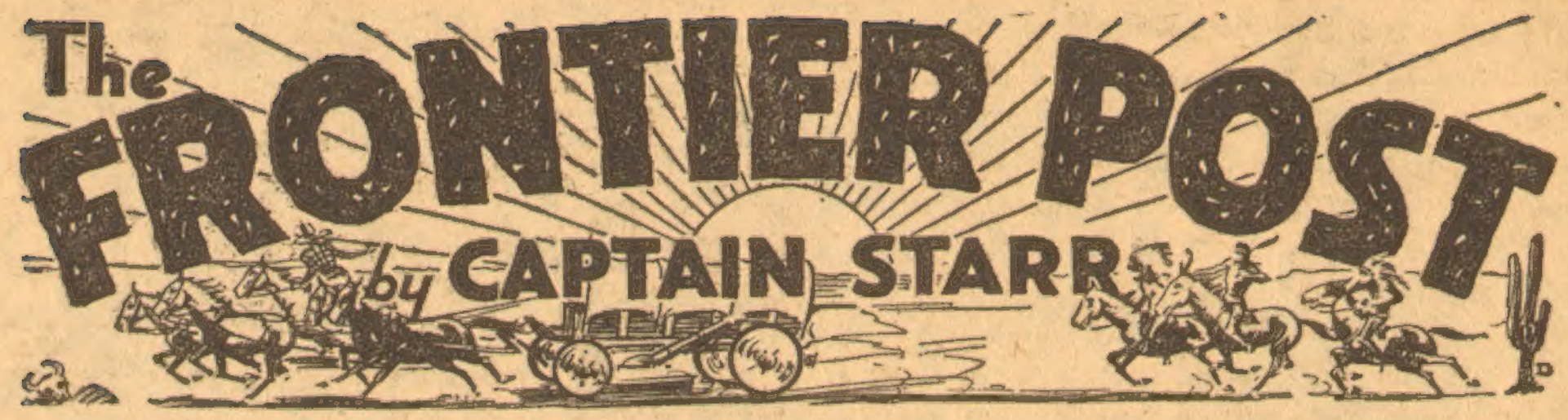

ALONG came a letter a short while back that roused my recollections of many a deer hunt and the strange experiences that befall a hunter.

This letter came from a prominent Detroit sportsman, Andy Langhammer, who makes a habit of keeping up with this Frontier Post palaver. It's such a good letter that I reckon you all will be interested, so here it is:

Captain, I wish you would write me concerning the following problem: You have a terrain of at least 1000 acres in which to hunt. The terrain includes two hills that are not very high; a large swamp and several smaller ones; open meadows, hidden meadows or swales; some densely wooded patches, and others not so dense. The trees are evergreens, quite a few oak, some poplar, all second or third growth stuff, plenty of grass, quite a bit of brush and patches of ferns.

There are also a few spots where there is water, but not enough so that you can't walk through in boots without wetting your feet.

The question is, with this terrain, where would you hunt for deer and how? Personally, I don't have a nervous system which permits sitting on a stump or in a blind a half day. I like to still hunt, or at least move around a bit. Another question, would the location and tactics change if the bucks are rutting or not rutting?

There's Andy's letter, folks, now here's my answer and "solution" to his problem. To start out with, the setting he describes would be unusual deer country anywhere from Texas west, because there's so much water and wet ground. Sounds like duck pasture to a dried-out cactus jumper, like me. Otherwise it has scattered cover, high places and low ones, with all the tricky lights and shadows that a wise old buck takes advantage of to baffle and outwit a hunter.

There's another thing not included in the description and that's wind. As I figure it, unless a brisk wind is blowing, stray air currents and counter-currents would be bound to exist where there's water, high ground, trees and vegetation in a limited area.

Maybe 1000 acres isn't a limited area in the Great Lakes region, but it sure is from Texas west. A mile-square section is 640 acres and most Western hunters feel cramped in such a small pasture.

After all, a deer a quarter-mile away is a possible shot if you pack a modern high-power rifle such as a .30-06 which is the favorite deer gun nowadays. And many a deer is downed at such range with scope sight. (440 yards, that would be.)

Once I upset a running buck at 500 yards with a .32 Special Winchester, which isn't nearly so much gun as the .30-06.

Theoretically, at least, a hunter in the middle of a 640-acre section could put a buck under effective fire on almost any part of that one-mile square. Providing it was broad, bright daylight and no obstruction lay between him and his target.

But Andy's problem ground consists of 1000 acres, so we've got to pull in our elbows and make the best of it. So let's get back to the matter of those tangled air currents, which on a calm day would distribute man-scent in almost any direction and thus greatly increase the difficulty of stalking with any hope of success. I might mention here something about scent that most hunters don't take into consideration. That is, the human critter gives off more scent when perambulating around than when inactive.

That being the case, I'd say that squatting on a stump or in a blind, cool and breathing easy, the hunter would be more likely to sight game and be offered an easy shot. In this connection, I notice that Andy speaks of moving around a bit as still hunting. My idea of still hunting is to rivet the seat of the pants to some stationary object and let restless hunters flush the game for you.

Just plain sitting can get mighty tire-

some and I don't like it any better than Andy. I had a mighty embarrassing experience one time at this dull business of waiting for a deer to happen along.

It was in California's Coast Range, where there's a deer known as the Pacific buck, a blacktail sub-species, I believe, which no matter its age, is never more than a forked horn.

The cover was chaparral, with here and there a live-oak flat, and sycamore canyons where the streambeds were mostly dry in the fall season.

I knew there'd be a flock of hunters working their way up from the lower country, so the night before opening day I played smart. I took my gun, a blanket, canteen and grub and climbed to the top of a long, high ridge that commanded a magnificent sweep of country. I bedded down in the rocks and at dawn took station on a ledge, rifle across my knees and waited.

Along about sunup and thereafter I heard shooting down yonder, thumbed my hammer and got all set to pick the fattest buck out of the herd that surely would stampede up my way. Nothing happened, nothing that I could see. The brush was thick, but looking down on it, I felt sure I could spot any deer making a sneak up from below.

It must have been along about 10 o'clock when my tormented tissues went on strike and I simply had to stand up and get the kinks out of my muscles.

The instant I did so, there was the sharp sound of a buck's "whistle" or snort. It leaped up, no more than 20 feet from where I had waited so long and patiently. Then in one spectacular leap it was off and away across a steep slope and over a rise before I could get my gun to shoulder.

I HARDLY know what that story proves, unless it is that you must always expect the unexpected when deer hunting. How in creation that buck got there beside me and how long it had been there, I don't know and never will.

This instance or two I reckon won't increase your enthusiasm for lazyman squat hunting, Andy. But I still think that the fellow who just plain sets and waits for 'em is the one that gets his deer oftenest, anywhere. I'd hunker down on one of those two hills you mention, with some likely ground spread out below you, and let the deer do the work.

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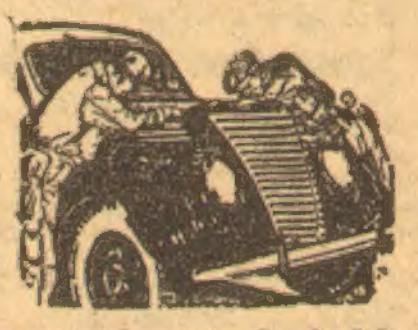

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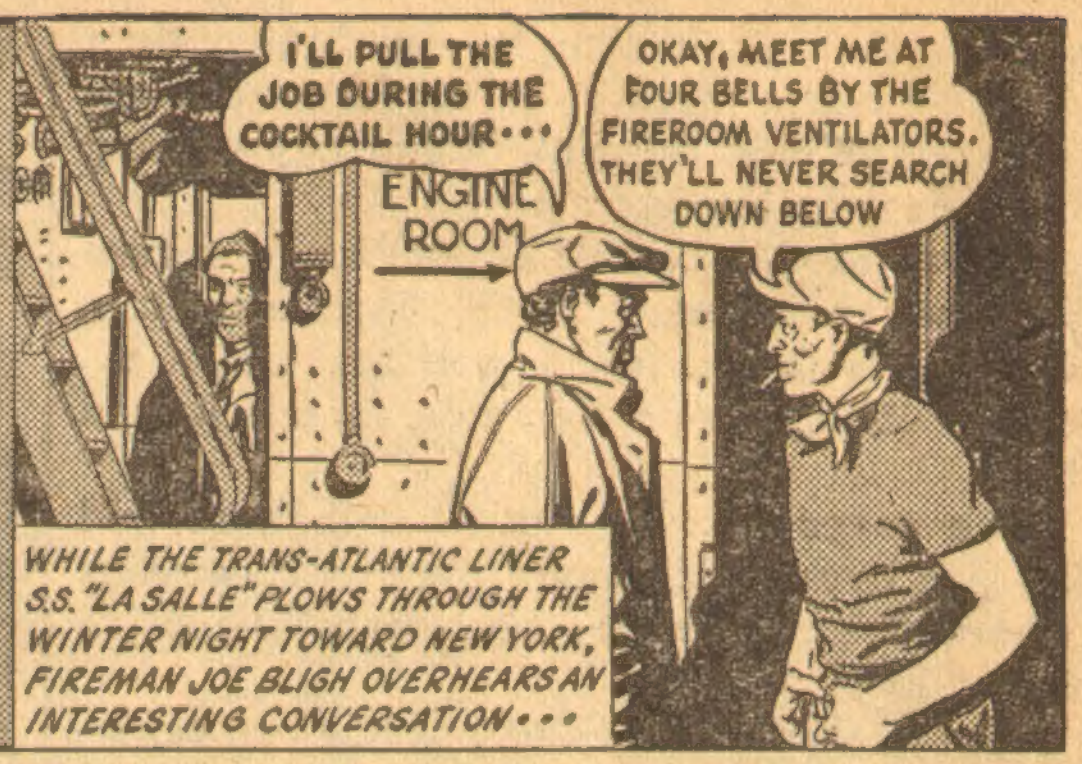
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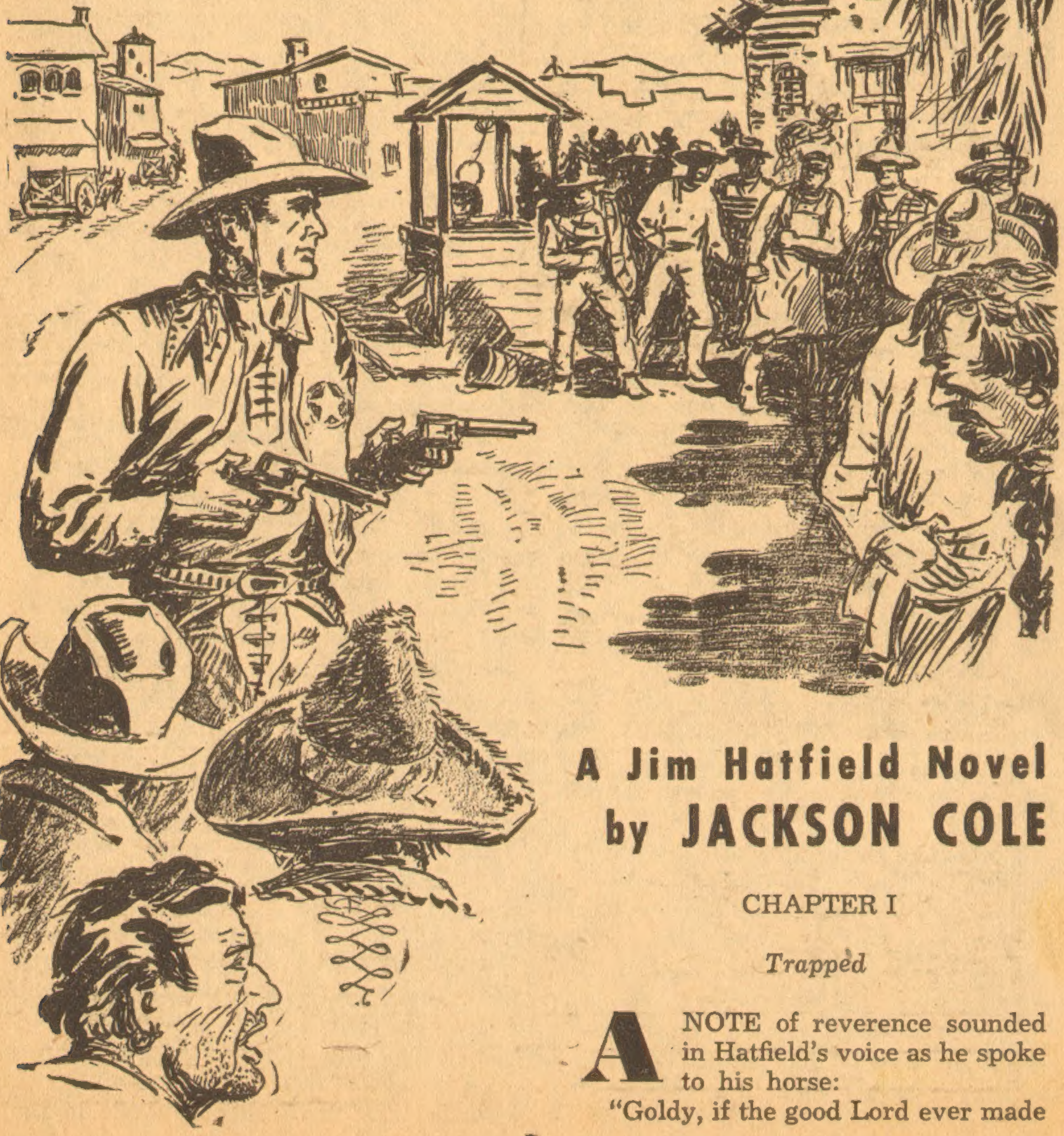
WAR of the WASTELANDS

When a troublemaker tries to seize the salt lakes of Sierra Blanca, Ranger guns roar!



A Jim Hatfield Novel
by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Trapped

A NOTE of reverence sounded in Hatfield's voice as he spoke to his horse:

"Goldy, if the good Lord ever made

anything finer, He sure kept it for Himself!"

Where the terrain dropped suddenly away to the south and west from the steep decline of Guadalupe Pass, Jim Hatfield, named the Lone Wolf by a stern old lieutenant of Rangers, pulled his tall sorrel to a halt and sat gazing across the stupendous hundred-mile panorama spread before his eyes. It was a section of wild and desolate grandeur, with the bitter beauty of the wastelands bathed in sunset's changes of light, color and shadow.

In the foreground to the south, the barren Delaware Mountains swept away in a southeasterly direction. Far to the south, across a glaringly white expanse of great salt flats, the Sierra Diablos loomed gaunt and mysterious.

But it was the weird section just west and south of the pass that interested Hatfield most. Ghastly white in the moonlight, a blinding glare under the sun, it stretched on and on. In the middle distance southward the bleak whiteness was broken by vivid blue-green splashes of color which were shallow lakes ringed with low dunes of almost pure salt. Heat waves shimmered and weaved above the intervening expanse and gave the lakes the eerie and unreal appearance of floating low in the superheated atmosphere. Their brilliantly hued water seemed to flicker in flamelike animation.

Here was the scene of the bloody conflict known as the El Paso Salt War, in which more than a score of men had met sharp and sudden death, that settled nothing.

Once again, the ghost of salt was lifting its leprous head. And once again the wastelands were threatened with feud and bloodshed, with grim possibilities of a strife that would make insignificant the salt war of earlier days.

Even as Hatfield gazed, the sun disappeared behind the serried battlements of the Huecos and in the middle distance to the southwest, movement became apparent. At first, Hatfield thought it but the wavering deception of a mirage. But it quickly assumed a three-dimensional solidity.

"Horses!" Hatfield muttered. "Coming fast, too."

SWIFTLY the moving clump evolved entity. Hatfield counted four horses. The riders took form and shape. The group was speeding northward on a track that crossed the salt to join the westward trail perhaps a thousand yards farther on.

Lounging comfortably in his saddle, Hatfield watched the approach of the horsemen. They rode purposefully and at good speed. In the crystal clear air, every detail of their equipment stood out sharply when they were still a mile or more distant.

"Cowhands," Hatfield mused. "Heading for home, the chances are. Perhaps after running a herd south to Sierra Blanca or Van Horn and the railroad. Sure not sparing their horses."

He reached for "the makings" and proceeded to manufacture a cigarette. Abruptly his slender fingers ceased manipulating paper and tobacco. Tense, rigid, he stared southward at the grim drama in progress on the arid flats.

From the dark, brush-clothed ridges to the east of the trail, whitish puffs were mushrooming in the still air. Before the crackle of the distant rifles reached Hatfield's ears, the four riders had spun from their saddles to sprawl on the ground.

The whitish puffs continued. Hatfield flinched in sympathy as the slugs hammered the writhing forms until they were still. The half formed cigarette fluttered through the air. He thrust the tobacco sack back into his pocket and his hands instinctively dropped to the butts of the heavy guns snugged in the cut-out holsters suspended from his double-cartridge belts. Instantly, however, his hands dropped away. The range was too great, even for the Winchester snugged in the

saddle boot beneath his left thigh. And for that matter, there was nothing to shoot at. Nothing was to be seen of the hidden drygulchers. The smoke puffs had dissipated. The dead men lay, small and lonely, in the center of the great plain. Their terrified horses were speeding back the way they had come to disappear over a rise.

Hatfield's hand tightened on the reins,

JIM HATFIELD

then relaxed. To ride into the open, under the circumstances, might easily be but an uncomfortable way to commit suicide.

"I've a notion the hellions who pulled that chore wouldn't take over kind to witnesses," he told Goldy, the sorrel. "We'll just hold back a little till we see which way the pickle squirts."

Minute after minute passed. Hatfield suspected that the drygulchers might come forward to make sure of their victims, but apparently such was not their intention. His eyes ranged back and forth across the silent growth that flanked the track. It was tall enough to conceal men and horses, but hardly enough to completely hide a mounted man.

Then a flicker of movement a good quarter of a mile to the east caught the Lone Wolf's eye.

"There they go!" he exclaimed. "Right over that rise. Snuk off through the brush on foot till they were sure they'd have a head start. Must have spotted me up here."

He sent the sorrel forward at a fast running walk. As he drew near, his attention centered on the grotesquely contorted bodies.

It was the sudden forward pricking of Goldy's ears and his inquiring snort that saved his rider. Hatfield had learned to watch for and respect his horse's actions. He was going sideways from the saddle even as a shot crashed from the brush. He heard the bullet yell past, fanning his face with its lethal breath. Then he was on the ground, hugging the dust, both guns flaming as he raked the brush with slugs. Answering shots slammed past or kicked dust into his face. One nicked his shoulder. Another burned a red streak across the back of his hand.

Then from the growth sounded a yell of agony that ended in a bubbling shriek chopped off short. The brush was violently agitated, as if something were thrashing about in death throes. Another moment and all was still.

HATFIELD took a chance. He rolled over and over across the trail with a swift writhing motion. In a bristle of weeds and tall grass he came to rest, peering and listening. The growth remained silent. Cautiously he got to his hands and knees and wormed his way toward where he had last heard a sound. Five minutes of slow and careful progress and he sighted something dark lying in the deepening shadows under the chaparral. He glided forward a little more and could make out the huddled form of a man. He got to his feet and moved toward it. A closer look and he holstered his guns and stepped forward boldly.

A slug from his Colt had torn out one whole side of the fellow's throat and he had bled to death in a few seconds. He lay on his side, his head twisted around at a grotesque angle.

Hatfield thought he had never seen a more hideous face, for the nose had been broken, the bridge driven inward, the mouth was screwed upward at one corner in a fixed grimace, due to the ill-healed scar of an old knife wound, and there was but a hint of brows and lashes to shade the muddy-colored eyes.

"Whe-e-ew!" the Ranger muttered. "Looks like a sheepherder's dream. Shouldn't be hard to run down something on this jigger. Anybody who ever saw that face sure wouldn't forget it. Wonder what he's got on him?"

Working swiftly, for the light was fading fast, he turned out the dead man's pockets, and discovered nothing of significance except a surprisingly large amount of money in gold coin.

"Looks like the hellion has been seeing prosperous times, anyhow," he mused. He

The outlaw sentry and Jim Hatfield fought savagely (CHAP. VI)

replaced the coin and other articles and stood up, glancing keenly about.

"Horse should be somewhere not far off," he reasoned. "Brand might tell something. A smart bunch, all right. Spotted me up there in the pass. Holed up a while and waited, figuring I'd ride down here pronto. When I didn't, they proceeded to fix up a nice little trap for me when I did show. Sneaked off through the brush, leading their horses, and then forked them and rode up over the rise where I'd be sure to see them. Left this handsome gent lying low and waiting to line sights with me soon as I got in range. All the time when I thought I was outsmarting them, they were outsmarting me. If it hadn't been for Goldy spotting that jigger, their little scheme would have worked. Chances are it would have worked anyhow if he'd

used a rifle instead of a six-gun. Then he could have downed me while I was up the trail. Slipped up there, I'm darn glad to say."

With a final glance at the unsavory looking specimen under the bush, he strode back to the trail and approached the bodies of the drygulched men. His long green eyes hardened and subtly changed color to an icy gray as he looked them over. They were undoubtedly cowhands and although they looked like a salty bunch, there was nothing either vicious or depraved in the dead faces. Three were fresh-faced young punchers, none older than the middle twenties. The fourth was a grizzled waddie with a lined, kindly looking face. All four were riddled with bullets.

"Never had a chance, poor devils," Hatfield muttered. "Now what in blazes is this all about? I never saw a more snake-blooded killing."

Working at top speed, he examined the bodies, and discovered nothing to identify them either by name or connections. Then he forked Goldy and rode south at a swift pace.

"Can't take any chances on hanging around here," he told the sorrel. "I've a prime notion those hellions are liable to come back when their partner doesn't show up, especially if they heard the shooting. And five against one is a mite too heavy odds to take on in the dark. We'll hole up somewhere for the night and then hightail to the county seat and notify the sheriff. It's around fifty miles to Van Horn and we don't know the country. Won't take a chance of mavericking around in the dark. Sure wish we'd had time to nose out that jigger's horse. I'd like to get a look at the brand it's packing, if any. Well, if it's tied in the brush somewhere, it'll bust loose when it gets tired of waiting, and a range critter can always fend for itself or amble back to where it belongs."

For nearly ten miles across the ghostly flats he rode steadily. Then, when he was beginning to consider the necessity of making a dry camp, he came upon a clump of low hills and under a cliff discovered a small spring of good water that bubbled forth a little stream which swiftly lost itself in the thirsty sands and salt. A full moon was casting its silvery radiance across the wastelands and by its light he quickly made camp, kindling a small fire from dry branches he broke from a straggle of thicket. In his saddle pouches was a supply of staple provisions and a few simple cooking utensils that could be stored compactly. Soon coffee was steaming and bubbling in a little flat bucket and bacon sizzling in a small pan.

After cleaning up, Hatfield doused the fire with water. Then he rolled up in his blanket at the base of the cliff and was almost instantly fast asleep.

CHAPTER II

Riders of the Night

THE MOON was low in the west and the wastelands were swathed in a dim and lurid light when Hatfield suddenly awakened. He lay motionless, listening intently, for he knew it was a sound that had roused him.

"Horses," he muttered an instant later, "coming from the north, and coming fast."

Louder grew the steady beat of approaching hoofs. Another moment and Hatfield sighted five horsemen riding past his camp. The rearmost rider led a horse burdened with some dark and bulky object that was evidently roped to its back. Silently, save for the jingle of bit irons, the popping of saddle leather and the rhythmic pound of hoofs, the ghostly troop swept past to be swallowed up by the shadows. Hatfield lay listening to the diminishing patter of the hoofs on the packed sands. When silence again reigned, he sat up, reached for the makings and rolled a cigarette with the slender fingers of his left hand. Carefully shading the match so no glimmer could be seen from a distance, he lighted the

cigarette and smoked thoughtfully, wondering who the voiceless riders of the night could be. It would appear that the arid wastelands were not so deserted as was popularly believed.

But he was still drowsy and decided the problem could wait till morning. So, after a few drags at his cigarette, he pinched out the butt and went back to sleep.

He was stirring with the first light of dawn. He cooked some breakfast, got the rig on Goldy and set out on his forty-mile ride to the county seat.

Passing beyond the limits of the salt flats, Hatfield found himself on a more hospitable terrain, although it was still wild and rugged enough. Grass and chaparral took the place of sand and arid desolation with the wooded slopes and craggy summits of the mountains towering on every hand. He skirted the western foothills of the Baylor Range, threaded a pass and after traversing another stretch of semi-desert land, reached Van Horn before the sun had crossed the meridian.

Van Horn's ancient adobes contrasted sharply with more modern buildings. The town had a bustling air and looked prosperous. Hatfield knew that the mountains to the northwest were rich in mineral resources, especially silver. Van Horn was also a shipping point and profited from the cattle industry of the section. It was the county seat of Culberson County.

Hatfield had no trouble locating the sheriff's office. Seated at a table desk was a rangy old fellow with a drooping mustache, a face the color of well used saddle leather and a very questioning pair of eyes set deep under shaggy brows. He was apparently in a very bad temper.

"Well," he growled truculently, with a sulphurous designation as to locality, "what do you want?"

Hatfield smiled. He was familiar with the type—a warm strictly honest and understanding personality under a decidedly crusty exterior. In terse sentences he outlined his experience of the night before.

The sheriff swore with amazing fluency. "Four of 'em done in, you say?" he demanded. "You sure you ain't full of tarantuler juice and imaginin' all this, cowboy?"

"Haven't had a drink for a week," Hatfield replied. "It happened just as I told you, suh. Here's the mark on my hand to vouch for that busted-nose gent's shooting ability, and I can pull down my shirt and show you another one on my shoulder."

"You'd better see a doctor," said the sheriff, concern replacing the anger in his voice.

"Just scratches," Hatfield deprecated. "By the way, suh, any notion who those four jiggers could be?"

READER'S shoulders lifted and then came down in an emphatic shrug.

"I can't say for sure," replied the sheriff, "but I'll bet my last peso they belong to either the Bradded H or the Running W outfits."

"Bradded H and Running W?"

"That's right. Those two bunches are on the prod against each other for fair. They had a set-to over in Sierra Blanca night before last. Fact is, I was just getting ready to ride to Sierra Blanca when you come in, and have a talk with Sheriff Potter. It's forty miles west of here. That's where the outfits to the north do most of their buyin'—lot of stores scattered around over there. I figured more trouble might be due to bust loose. Now I'll have to ride north and look over what happened up there."

"And you can't place the jigger who tried to do for me? He was sort of outstanding in appearance, as I told you."

The sheriff shook his head. "But it ain't anything to wonder at," he explained. "Both them nests of sidewinders has been hiring' new hands of late. Professional gun fighters, everybody says. I figure I'll know the fellers who got killed, though. As I said, they're mighty sure to belong to one or other of those outfits. You say one was a sort of old feller? That could be Tarp Henry's range boss, Johnson McCray, but I would know for sure till I saw him."

"Who's Tarp Henry?"

"He's the owner of the Bradded H, the biggest outfit in the section," the sheriff said. "Henry's been some punkins in this section for a good many years. Just about run it, in fact. Most everybody kowtowed to him till Slade Walters showed up here and bought the old Bar X and changed the brand to the Running W and built over the whole ramshackle shebang into a number one prime cow factory. Walters has sort of set Henry back a peg since he showed up, and it looks like the two bunches are headed for a pretty rough showdown."

"Nice section I've ambled into, it seems," Hatfield commented. "Figured I might tie onto a chore of riding hereabouts, but I'm beginning to wonder."

"Oh, you can tie onto a chore, all right," the sheriff replied grimly. "Any seven-foot, broad-as-a-barn-door jigger packin' two guns can get on with the Bradded H or the Runnin' W without a mite of arguing. By the way," he added, his eyes abruptly becoming even more questioning than before, "where'd you come from, anyhow?"

"Over east," Hatfield replied.

"That ain't very definite," the sheriff grunted. "Lots of country over east of here."

"Well, I rode for the XL, Pink Higgins' outfit, on the Brazos," Hatfield answered, with perfect truth. He did not deem it necessary to remark that a considerable number of years had elapsed since he was range boss to the redoubtable Higgins.

"Knew Pink quite a while back," grunted the sheriff. "A hard man."

"But a square shooter," Hatfield instantly countered.

"No dispute about that," conceded the sheriff. "But my recollection is he sort of specialized in hirin' hard men, too. Folks ain't likely to soon forget the Higgins-Horrel war in that section. Oh, well, ain't none of my business where a feller come from or who he worked for, so long as he keeps his nose clean in my territory. I've got enough trouble as it is, what with Henry and Walters and Simon Borracho."

"Who's Simon Borracho?"

THE SHERIFF scowled. "Wish I knew the answer to that one," he said. "Fact is, I ain't sure for certain there really is a Simon Borracho, despite all the talk about him. Folks say he's the leader of the River Villages folks—the Mexicans over to San Elizario, Socorra, Ysleta and so on, and the towns on the south bank of the Rio Grande—El Paso del Norte, Sargossa, Loma Colorado, Gudalupe and San Ignacio—but nobody seems to know just who he is. And there's even conflicting reports as to what he looks like. Some say he's tall. Most folks say that. Others say he's a short jigger with red hair. Anyhow, he sets up to be a sort of liberator and a feller out to get the Mexican a square deal. I figure he's responsible for most of the hell raisin' goin' on in the section of late and just a chaparral poppin' owlhoot. Anyhow, the river folks believe in him and are ready to listen to anything he says."

"I know something about those folks," Hatfield remarked thoughtfully. "They're peculiarly susceptible to leadership. Under good leaders they are a docile, harmless people and good citizens. Under the wrong kind, they can be as bad as the hellions giving them orders want them to be."

"You're right about that," growled the sheriff. "Remember what happened in the El Paso salt war, when Louis Cardis, that renegade *padre*, Antonio Borajo, Jesus Tello and their like was herdin' 'em. Well, I'll have to be travelin'. I'm not askin' you to come along, son, not after you havin' already done fifty miles in the saddle today, but I am askin' you to stay here till I get back. After all, you're a material witness, and, so far as I know, the only gent who saw what happened."

The sheriff's eyes strayed toward the cell block in the rear of his office as he spoke. Hatfield interpreted the glance, and smiled.

"Don't reckon it's necessary to lock me

up," he remarked. "I'll be here. My word on it."

The sheriff flushed, and looked a little sheepish. For an instant he hesitated, but as he glanced up at the level green eyes so high above him, he nodded.

"That's enough," he said. "I've a notion it is considerable better than the average man's bond. And, after all, you didn't have to come and tell me about what happened. Fact is, under the circumstances, most folks hereabouts who saw a thing like that happen would have hightailed the other direction and would have kept a tight latigo on their jaws. Talkin' about such things in this section ain't considered healthy. And if a jigger happened to have a run-in with the drygulchin' bunch and downed one of 'em, as you say you did, chances are that gent wouldn't stop till he was in California or squattin' on a nice comfortable spot out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean."

The sheriff paused, eyeing Hatfield. "Fact is," he added, "after I get back and have a talk with you, I've a notion that would be a plumb sensible thing for you to do."

Hatfield smiled and shook his black head. "Don't feel like taking such a long ride, right at present," he replied cheerfully. "Reckon I'll coil my twine hereabouts for a spell, if I can find something to do. Sounds like an interesting section."

"Well," the sheriff said dryly, as he buckled on his guns, "I've heard tell of folks who like to poke rattlesnakes in the eye and play tag with grizzlies. Everybody to their taste, as the old lady said when she kissed the cow. So long, son, see you when I get back. A place to eat? Well, the Terlingua Saloon is about as good as any. It's right across the street. Liquor ain't bad, either, and they run straight games, if you're in a notion for a mite of buckin'. They got some flea-bag rooms upstairs where a feller can sleep between spells of scratchin', and the dance floor gals ain't bad lookin' and are sort of amiable, or so I've heard. Livery stable in the alley next to the saloon. I keep my critters there."

HATFIELD chuckled, and left the sheriff's office. He was grave immediately afterward, however. He had heard what he considered disquieting news. He had understood that something like a range war was building up in the section, but the injection of a fanatical rabble-rouser, such as he gathered the mysterious Simon Borracho apparently was, provided a new and disturbing factor.

Hatfield knew that the Mexican-Texans and their cousins south of the river were in an irritable mood over the salt lakes. There were hints that once again a syndicate was being formed to promote a new assault on the legislature in an endeavor to take over the lakes for private profit. Salt had for many years been the chief source of revenue of the River Villages and the prosperity of their citizens largely depended on it. Captain McDowell had been unable to learn anything definite concerning the situation, but the rumors were flying and rumors can often do more damage than established fact.

"But if what happened up north last night was the work of one or other of the cow outfits, that angle will provide trouble a-plenty, without any help from other sources," the Lone Wolf decided.

On his way to the livery stable, Hatfield paused to gaze at an interesting procession rumbling northward on the trail by which he had entered the town. It consisted of six two-wheel carts drawn by mules. On each cart was a big water barrel, for the drivers took no chances with the one hundred and eighty miles round-trip from San Elizario to the lakes. They packed along their own water. The salt they gathered would be run across the river and sold in *mañana* land at a good profit.

"The Mexicans don't take no chances any more," observed a nearby lounger who had noticed the direction of Hatfield's gaze. "They go in bunches now. Last week two carts was drygulched and burned and the drivers shot. You'll notice them fellers are packin' rifles. Reckon they aim to be ready for business."

Hatfield nodded and passed on, even more thoughtful than before.

The livery stable proved satisfactory, and after making sure that all Goldy's wants were provided for, Hatfield repaired to the Terlingua Saloon for some food. As he paused outside the swinging doors, he saw the sheriff and two deputies canter out of town, headed north. A third deputy drove a light wagon, a grim reminder of the unpleasant chore they had to do.

Entering the saloon, Hatfield was met by a smiling Mexican who bowed and greated him with,

"*Buenos dias, Senor.* Welcome to our humble establishment."

At the far end of the bar, by the till, a fat and Teutonic looking individual observed,

"*Goot Morgen.*"

And as Hatfield approached the bar, a very skinny gentleman polishing glasses remarked in an accent that could have been acquired no place other than within the sound of Big Ben.

"Gorblimey! but they run to size in this bloody country!"

Hatfield chuckled. He understood now the saloon's rather unusual name.

"*Terlingua*—three tongues," he translated.

"That's right," said the cockney. "Pedro spouts Spanish. Hans is sort of good at the Dootch. Hi'm Gormy, and Hi speak the kings Henglish as it should be spoke. We got together down to the south of here a couple of years back and come to town together. We had a few bob between us and bought this bloody pub. Been doin' purty well, too. What will you 'ave? Hi got a few bottles of prime 'arf-and-'arf on ice."

"And we serve goot schnapps," called Hans from the end of the bar.

"And our *tequila*, eet is most excellent," observed Pedro at Hatfield's elbow.

"Hold it!" Hatfield chuckled. "If I listen to all you fellers, I'll be seeing snakes before I get out."

"The bloody snakes come free," said Gormy. "One with every third swig."

Hatfield settled for the ale, which proved to be strong and good. Then, still chuckling over the queer trio of proprietors, he sauntered to a table and ordered a meal.

The Terlingua's food proved excellent and Hatfield ate with appetite. He enjoyed a leisurely smoke and then ambled out to give the town a once-over.

CHAPTER III

From Out the Storm

IN A LITTLE while Sheriff Tom Rader and his deputies overtook the train of salt carts a short distance north of Van Horn. With a "Howdy, *hombres?*" on one side, and a "*Buenos dias,* Senor Sheriff," on the other, they rode on and soon left the lumbering vehicles far behind.

The sheriff eyed the western sky with a frowning brow as they approached the salt flats. "Don't like the look of it," he told his deputies. "See that haze climbin' up over the Huecos? That means wind, or I'm a heap mistook, and a bad windstorm out here ain't anything to sneeze at. Yes, it's wind, sure as blazes. We're due to eat a lot of salt before we sight Guadalupe Pass."

"Be tough on them poor devils back there with the carts," a deputy said. "They can't make any speed."

The sheriff nodded agreement. "But the Mexicans are sort of used to it," he added. "They stand it better than we do. Reckon we don't need to worry about them."

In which surmise, the sheriff was decidedly wrong.

Higher and higher climbed the hazy cloud over the crests of the distant mountains. A little later a puff of wind fanned the faces of the posse.

But there was nothing cool or refreshing about that lazy breath. It had a blast-furnace quality. Again it came, stronger. The sheriff swore and loosened his neckerchief.

Still higher climbed the ominous cloud, piled and battlemented, heavy with evil.

The sky changed from blue to a jaundiced saffron, from which the sun shone like a blotched orange in a vast bowl of scorched flour. The wind was now a steady blast that strengthened momentarily. All about was a weird, stealthy rustling sound. The sand and salt particles were beginning to stir.

Swiftly the wind strengthened to a gusty gale. Down on the ridges and in the washes dust sheets were whipped up with each torrid blast. Clouds of flying sand and salt swished and whispered through the air, and at times, grains of gravel. The sky was obscured by sweeping, curling streaks and sheets of dust. Then the gale would roar away and the dust would settle and the lower air clear somewhat. But high up the yellowish pall hung, apparently motionless, with the weird sun glaring down like a bloody eye with swollen veins. Then again would come the wind and the sky would be a terrible abyss of flying yellow shadows and filled with the moan and shriek of the warring elements.

The salt carts were making hard going of it. The mules sneezed and moaned. Their swollen tongues protruded. Their eyes were bloodshot and fringed with the gray rime of the salt. The drivers swathed their serapes about their faces, but fine siftings of dust floated and fell, dry and choking, stinging the flesh like invisible sparks of fire, and worked beneath the protecting cloth. Breathing was almost an impossibility. A wave of intenser heat moved down across the flats, a withering blast that dried the blood in the veins and sapped the strength of men and animals.

But the drivers doggedly drove their struggling beasts on through the murk and and the turmoil. They were striving to reach a range of tall sand-and-salt dunes, beneath the hollowed-out overhangs of which they could find shelter.

At last the dunes came into view—vast, wavering, chaotic masses seen through the whirling yellow shadows. The drivers croaked hoarsely to their mules and the near exhausted animals quickened their pace. The drivers straightened, and sighed with relief. They swerved the carts toward the towering sides of the shelter of the overhangs.

Through the swirling sand clouds suddenly loomed shapes of solider shadow, grotesque, gigantic. Lances of flame shot through the murk. The roar of the rifles echoed hollowly in the thick air. The bellow of the wind drowned the screams of agony, the cries to the saints, as the drivers whirled from their seats and fell. Volley after volley blazed and thundered, then all was still save for the shriek and moan of the wind and the braying of the terrified mules.

The shadowy shapes resolved to mounted men. They slipped from their saddles, cut the mules loose to fend for themselves. There was a flicker of fire, a smoulder, fanned to leaping flame by the wind. A few minutes later, the killers mounted their horses and rode away from the fiercely burning carts. The sifting sand began mounding over the still forms that had been the Mexican salt seekers.

[*Turn page*]

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BACK in town, Hatfield found Van Horn interesting, with its time-mellowed adobes and its well constructed newer buildings. As the afternoon progressed, he felt that the town was unduly active for the middle of the week. Groups of cowhands kept riding in, hitching their horses at the long racks and trooping into the saloons and dance halls.

"Either payday or somethin's in the wind," he decided. "Salty looking jiggers, too. I've a notion this is a lively section, all right."

When Hatfield returned to the Terlingua shortly after dark, he found the place quite different from what it was on his former visit. The bar was lined from end to end, all the games were busy and a very good Mexican orchestra was playing for the throng of dancers.

Gradually the Lone Wolf became aware of the fact that he was the object of scrutiny of a pair of extremely attractive eyes. Seated alone at a table at the edge of the floor was a girl, a very pretty girl dressed in the dance floor costume.

Her eyes were astonishingly big and equally astonishingly blue. She had reddish-brown hair inclined to curl, a piquant little face boasting red, sweetly turned lips and a pert little nose slightly tip-tilted and with a few freckles on the straight bridge. Her figure was slim and graceful. The low-cut bodice of her silken costume showed the upper swell of her firm young bosom. Altogether she stood out decidedly among her companions. To his surprise, Hatfield noticed that she twice refused invitations to dance.

"But she's giving me the once-over, for some reason or other," he decided. "Wonder what's the big notion, anyhow?"

There was frank invitation in the blue eyes. Hatfield hesitated a moment, then stood up lithely, towering over the men around him. With leisurely strides he crossed the dance floor, paused beside the girl's table and smiled down at her, his even teeth flashing startlingly white in his deeply bronzed face.

"Mind if I have the next one, ma'am?" he asked in his deep, musical voice.

The girl smiled reply. "It will be the pleasure," she said. She stood up and Hatfield encircled her trim little waist with a long arm, and they moved out upon the floor.

Almost immediately the girl began to talk, voicing gay, inconsequential remarks in kind with those about her. Hatfield fell into her mood and replied in a like vein. They glided around the edge of the floor, where there were fewer couples, and while Hatfield was leading, he realized that she was urging their course. She flung back her shapely little head and laughed gaily. But Hatfield was suddenly aware that words were tumbling through the merriment, and that she spoke with a slight accent.

"You speak the Spanish, *Senor*?" she asked. Hatfield nodded.

"Do not start, do not change expression," she said, in that language. "But listen closely. *Senor*, you are in great danger."

Hatfield nodded again, and did not appear particularly impressed.

"It is so," the girl continued. "Tonight men will seek to kill you."

"How do you know?" the Lone Wolf asked.

"I heard—I heard men talking," she replied. "Do not ask me more, for I cannot tell you. But, *Senor*, be on your guard."

"Okay," Hatfield replied in English, "but why should somebody want to kill me?"

"Have you forgotten what happened yesterday—to the north?" the girl answered quickly.

"How'd you know about that?" Hatfield questioned.

"I heard—talk," she parried quickly.

Hatfield gazed down at her, his eyes narrowing slightly. Then he shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Okay, *senorita*, much obliged," he said. "Now let's dance."

THEY danced, danced in a fashion that quickly drew attention to them. But while Hatfield led his charming partner

through intricate steps, his steady eyes were constantly probing the room. He could see nothing to excite suspicion. They were surrounded by a ring of friendly admiring faces. Nowhere could he notice a hostile expression, and the comments that arose were enthusiastic.

"Well, if that ain't the dadburnedest best lookin' couple I ever clapped eyes on," an old cowpuncher declared in tones that carried. "Never seed a big jigger so light on his feet as that feller. Them two look like they was made for each other."

"Uh-huh," agreed a companion. "That's the kind of feller you dream about bein' like, and never get to be, and the little gal is a plumb knockout. Ain't never seen anything like her, either."

"When they make the sort like them two they bust the mold," said the first speaker.

Hatfield liked to dance and in the blue-eyed girl he had found an extremely satisfactory partner. She was like to a flower swaying in the dawn wind, and the close pressure of her warm, supple body was exhilarating, to say the least. In his long arms she seemed as fragile as a snowflake, but he sensed a surprising strength to her lithe, willowy form. Her dress, he noticed, though alluringly revealing, was more modest than those of the other girls and bespoke that illusive but very real attribute called, for want of a better word, good taste. Her voice was soft and cultured.

"Wonder where in blazes she came from?" he wondered as they circled the floor that was now almost deserted, the other dancers having drawn back to give them room and to watch. "One thing's sure for certain, she's not the ordinary dance hall type. What's she doing in a place like this, anyhow?"

The floor was practically deserted save for Hatfield and the girl. They circled around close to the outer wall, and toward a raised window that opened onto the alley where the livery stable was situated. The alley was dark save for a beam shining from a street light on the corner. As they passed the window, Hatfield's roving glance took in the dark square. With a single lightning move he hurled the girl from him and went sideways and down. Outside the window a gun roared. A lance of flame split the darkness. The back bar mirror flew to pieces under the impact of the bullet that missed the Ranger by scant inches.

In the flash of the gun, Hatfield had a fleeting glimpse of a dark face and glittering eyes.

Recovering his balance by a miracle of agility, the Lone Wolf dived for the window, both guns blazing. Outside he heard a wailing curse, a floundering about, then the pad of swift steps fleeing toward the deeper darkness of the alley. Holstering one gun, he vaulted the window sill and landed on the ground ouside. He sent two swift shots booming down the alley, flattened himself against the wall and listened. Save for the turmoil in the room he had just quitted and the questioning shouts of men peering cautiously out of the window, he heard nothing. He glided forward a score of yards or so, but saw that there were openings between the buildings that hemmed the alley on either side, into any of which the drygulcher could have darted. He ejected the spent shells from his guns, replaced them with fresh cartridges and walked up the alley.

"Some drunk slap-happy with a hogleg, I reckon," he replied to the questions volleyed through the window. "He got away."

An angry occupant of the room cursed the ambusher. "Ain't safe to be alive hereabouts any more."

HATFIELD walked on to the head of the alley. "A nice try," he muttered. "They sure don't waste any time in this section. And if it hadn't been for the little lady putting me sort of on the lookout so I wasn't missing anything, there's a good chance I'd have gotten that slug dead center. Saw the light glint on that hellion's gun barrel as he shifted it to line sights, just in time. Have to go back in and say much obliged to her."

But when he re-entered the saloon, the

girl was nowhere in sight. Replying briefly to the questions of the still excited patrons, he went back to his table, sat down and rolled a cigarette. All around, men were animatedly discussing the recent event.

"Did you see that draw," Hatfield heard somebody say. "I never saw anything like it in my life."

"And you didn't see it then," countered someone else. "Nobody saw it. Them guns just happened in that big jigger's hands. Gentlemen, hush!"

Pedro came hurrying over to the table, mopping his face with a handkerchief.

"*Ai!*" he remarked as he sat down. "There are times when I wish I had never left my burros and my prospector's pick. One might go hungry at times, but one had peace of mind. *Senor,* it would appear you have an enemy."

"Could be," Hatfield replied noncommittally, "but as I said, it may have been just some jigger drunk and letting off steam. By the way, where's that girl I was dancing with? Don't seem to see her around anywhere."

"Doubtless in the back room, recovering from the experience," Pedro replied. "The girls change their costumes there and rest when not on the floor. I will go see."

He hurried to the closed door of the back room. Hatfield noted with approval that he knocked before opening the door. Very shortly he was back, a look of surprise on his face.

"She is not there," he said. "Evidently she departed, in haste. Her dance costume hangs on its hook."

Hatfield looked thoughtful. "Know anything much about her?" he asked.

"Very little," Pedro admitted. "She came here something over a week ago, and asked for work. She appeared somewhat different from the girls we usually get, but she impressed me and my partners favorably, so we put her on. She was efficient and well behaved, but I noticed she always seemed to be looking for somebody. Tonight I thought that doubtless you were the man."

"Reckon not," Hatfield smiled. "Never saw her before, and she could hardly have known a week back that I was headed this way, seeing as I didn't know it myself."

Pedro nodded. "She must have been ver' greatly frightened to leave in such haste and say nothing," he said.

"Well, I reckon she heard the screech of that slug as it went past," Hatfield remarked. "I sure heard it, all right."

Pedro chuckled. "Gormy hear it also," he said, "and felt wind of it. And it very much spoil the back bar mirror," he added wryly. "Of a certainty we will have to get one shipped in to replace it. Well, thanks to *El Dios* that only the mirror suffered."

CHAPTER IV

The Lone Wolf

SHORTLY afterward, Hatfield went upstairs to his room and slept soundly, the sheriff's prediction anent scratching being unfounded. Before going to bed, however, he cleaned and oiled his guns and paused to roll a cigarette and light it. The sheriff's remark about the mysterious Simon Borracho, bandit leader, revolutionary, recurred to him.

Hatfield was inclined to discount Borracho, to even doubt his existence. The River country was full of such yarns.

"I'll have another little gab with the sheriff when he gets back tomorrow," Hatfield told himself, and went to bed.

The sheriff and one deputy arrived late the following afternoon, riding in front of the wagon that rumbled along with its grim burden.

But to Hatfield's astonishment, the wagon was piled high with bodies.

"What in blazes?" he wondered. "Did the sheriff line sights with that drygulching bunch and down all of 'em?"

Closer inspection, however, showed that a number of the dead men had dark faces and were garbed in pantaloons, short

jackets and hempen sandals.

"Mexicans, sure as shooting," Hatfield muttered. "Now what?"

He approached the sheriff, who was giving directions for the disposal of the bodies. The old peace officer nodded shortly. "Come in," he said, in no very friendly tones, and led the way to his office. He sat down and waved Hatfield to a chair.

"Those fellers belonged to the Bradded H, all right," he said without preamble. "Johnson McCray, Henry's range boss, and three of his riders. I sent Hank Blivens, my deputy, up to Henry's place to notify him. Directed him to come to town with Hank tomorrow."

"What about the others you brought in?" Hatfield asked.

"Mexican salt diggers," the sheriff replied. "We found 'em beside that line of big dunes half way acros the flats. Shot to pieces. Their carts had been burned."

Hatfield's eyes turned coldly gray. Here was disturbing news indeed. He stared at the old peace officer, who was regarding him in a very questioning way.

"Son," said the sheriff, "you sure you didn't dream up that yarn you told me about havin' a run-in with a feller up there in the brush and downin' him?"

"No," Hatfield replied briefly, "I didn't dream it. Why?"

"Well," said the sheriff, "we hunted that brush patch over from one end to the other, and we didn't find any body."

Hatfield was silent for a moment. Then he met the sheriff's questioning eyes with his steady gaze.

"I've a notion I can explain that," he said.

"Wouldn't be a bad notion," the sheriff returned significantly.

Briefly, Hatfield recounted his sight of the shadowy riders passing his camp under the cliff.

"And I've a notion," he concluded, "that the led horse I saw was packing the body of that brush shooter. It was too dark to make out anything much, but there were five fellers streaked over the rise after the Bradded H bunch was downed, and five riders passed my camp."

The sheriff tugged his mustache and rumbled something unintelligible. Hatfield continued to regard him.

"Still figure the Running W outfit was responsible for those killings up there?" he asked.

THE SHERIFF shrugged, and avoided a direct reply. "There's bad blood between those two outfits, as I told you," he said, "and it's said both bunches are bringin' in hired gun slingers and gettin' ready to fight it out to a finish. If you told me a straight yarn about what happened up there, what am I to think?"

Hatfield was silent for a moment, then—

"Believe you told me the Running W spread is up to the north of the salt flats," he remarked.

"That's right," the sheriff agreed. "Over to the west of Tarp Henry's holdin's. What of it?"

"Well," said Hatfield, "allowing that the Running W outfit did the shooting and the jigger I downed was one of their bunch, doesn't it seem a mite funny to you that they'd be packing his body down in this direction instead of taking it back to headquarters to dispose of it?"

The sheriff blinked and started. "Why—why that is sort of funny," he admitted. "As I said before, allowing that you're telling me a straight yarn, I figured the hellions sneaked that body off so nobody would get a look at it and perhaps recognize the skunk and tie him up with somebody else. But I'll be darned if I can see why they'd be headed south with it ten miles below where they picked it up. Doesn't seem to make sense."

"No, working on the premise that the Running W was responsible for the killings," Hatfield said quietly.

"It sure don't jibe," the sheriff agreed, "but nothin' hereabouts seems to make sense any more." He tugged his mustache fiercely, regarded Hatfield from under his shaggy brows.

"Son," he said, "I formed a good opinion of you the first time I laid eyes on you, and I can't say as I've altered it. But

there'll be an inquest held tomorrow, and you'll be asked a lot of questions. Me not bein' able to find that body sort of puts you on a spot, even though you did ride in and tell me about the killings up there. You'll have to admit that it would be possible for one man to hole up with a rifle, say in the mouth of the pass up there, and down four men comin' across the flats."

Hatfield smiled slightly.

"And drop 'em all in one bunch?" he asked.

"Don't seem reasonable, but it could be done," the sheriff repeated stubbornly. "Suppose somebody brings that point up tomorrow? Tarp Henry will be in a mighty bad temper when he shows up here, and he packs a lot of influence in this section. Chances are nobody could prove anything against you, but they might cause you considerable trouble."

Hatfield nodded. He had already considered that angle. Such an eventuality would necessitate revealing his identity and he did not desire to have his Ranger connections broadcast over the section at the moment. He studied Sheriff Wade before replying. He was already of the opinion that the old peace officer was a square shooter and close mouthed. A strong ally would come in handy if trouble developed. He arrived at a decision. He fumbled a moment at a cunning concealed secret pocket, and laid something on the sheriff's desk.

Sheriff Wade stared at the object, his jaw dropping. It was a gleaming silver star set on a silver circle, the feared and honored badge of the Texas Rangers!

"Wh-what!" stuttered the sheriff. "You mean to tell me you're a Ranger?"

"Yes," Hatfield replied composedly. "I'm a Ranger, all right. Captain McDowell sent me over here to sort of look into things. Plenty of reports been coming into headquarters of late."

"Well, I'll—I'll be darned!" said the sheriff. "A Ranger!"

SUDDENLY his eyes blazed with excitement. "And I got you placed!" he exclaimed. "Thought you reminded me of somebody I'd heard tell of. You're the Lone Wolf!"

"Been called that," Hatfield admitted.

The sheriff stared, almost in awe, at the man whose exploits were already legendary throughout the Southwest.

"The Lone Wolf!" he repeated. "Now if this don't take the shingles off the barn!"

He was about to say more, but Hatfield interrupted. "Want to tell you what happened last night," he said. Briefly he recalled the details of the happenings in the Terlingua. The sheriff swore luridly when he had finished.

"And you say Slade Walters and his bunch was settin' right alongside the girl's table before she warned you that somethin' was buildin' up? Well, that sure looks like the lowdown on Walters."

"Not unless we can find the girl and get her to talk," Hatfield pointed out.

"I'll find her and she'll talk," the sheriff promised grimly. "Chances are she'll be back in the Terlingua tonight, after she's got over her scare."

"I've thought of that," Hatfield admitted, "but I've a notion she won't. She didn't strike me as the sort who scares easily. I figure she had other reasons for trailing her rope."

"Uh-huh, she might figure that bunch caught on to what she did," said the sheriff. "Chances are if they knew she warned you and kept them from gettin' you, her life wouldn't be worth a busted peso, even though she is a woman. An outfit that pulls what they been pullin' wouldn't stop at anything. If she figures that, the chances are she is in Mexico by now, and goin' fast. You said she spoke with a Spanish accent?"

"Seemed that way to me," Hatfield said, "but it was very slight. She spoke Spanish like a native, but her English was also excellent. I would say she was accustomed to using both languages."

"I'll have a talk with the boys over to the Terlinqua," the sheriff said. "Maybe they can give us a line on her."

Hatfield nodded, but he was not optimistic on that score.

"Don't worry about the inquest tomorrow," the sheriff said. "I'll put out that I know you rode for my old *amigo*, Pink Higgins, and that you worked for other folks of good standin' that I know. Reckon that's so, too," he added. "Bill McDowell and me used to punch cows together before he got lazy and joined the Rangers."

"So he told me," Hatfield replied, with a grin.

"What did that old coot say about me?" the sheriff demanded suspiciously.

"Oh, nothing much," Hatfield evaded. "But I do recollect him saying something about a feller who went courting a girl down in McMullen county and got his pants snagged off on a barbed wire fence."

"Why, that onery-tongued old liar!" roared the sheriff. "He knocked that fence flat himself, and when I got there, there wasn't a wire standin'. We was both courtin' that gal, and we went up together to see her one evenin'. Her dad met us at the door with a double-barreled shotgun in his hand and blood in his eye.

"And that was the time," the sheriff added pensively, "that I found out I could outrun buckshot. But Bill was so far ahead of me when that scattergun cut loose he was just a little dust cloud against the sky. Golly but them buckshot did whistle! We never went back."

"Captain Bill always struck me as a feller of good sense," Hatfield agreed.

The sheriff chuckled. "Let's go over to the Terlingua and eat," he said. "I want to ask some questions about that gal who tipped you off."

HOWEVER, nothing came of the sheriff's questioning. Neither Gormy nor Hans could add anything to what Pedro told Hatfield the night before. And the girl herself did not put in an appearance.

After spending some time in the Terlingua, with barren results, they returned to the sheriff's office. Old Tom Rader wore a worried expression.

"What's bothering me most right now," he confided to Hatfield, "is the killing of those salt diggers. When folks down to the River Villages hear about it, they're goin' to boil. There's about fifteen thousand people live in those little towns scattered along on both sides of the Rio Grande, and all but a handful are Mexicans or Mexican descent. Even though most of them on this side the Line are Texans and have been for generations, still they're more Mexican in customs and ways of thinkin'. They sort of band together with their cousins south of the river, and they're all tied up, more or less, in the salt business. What happened up there on the flats is goin' to set all of them on the prod. They're good folks, most of 'em, but they can rear and charge and paw sod if necessary. I'm afraid we're in for trouble."

Hatfield nodded. He was of the same opinion. "Has Henry or Walters ever shown any interest in salt?" he asked.

"Not that anybody knows of," replied the sheriff. "Walters is a shrewd proposition, all right, and has got an eye for chances to make money, but he's a cowman, no doubt about that, and his interest appears to be in cows, although he seems to know considerable about minin'. Henry has always been a cowman, nothin' else, and I can't see him gettin' mixed up in a trouble-buildin' business like salt."

He paused a moment to fish out his pipe and light it. When it was drawing to his satisfaction, he resumed his talk,

"No, Henry never seemed to take any interest in salt," he said, "but Howard Burton has been seen ridin' around the flats and studyin' the lakes quite a few times of late."

"Who's Howard Burton?" Hatfield asked.

"He showed up here about six months back," said the sheriff. "Reckon callin' him Tarp Henry's manager wouldn't be far off from the truth. I understand he ran one of Henry's spreads up in the Panhandle for a while—the Shanghai M. Turned a losin' proposition into a payin' one in less than a year. So Henry brought him down here to headquarters and he just about runs the big Bradded H, and

looks over Henry's holdin's in New Mexico and other sections. He's plumb efficient, all right, and appears to be a mighty nice feller."

Hatfield rose abruptly to his feet. "Well, I'm turning in."

The sheriff swore wearily and got up, too. "So am I," he said. "I'm goin' to bed so I'll be ready for the next hell raisin'. And tomorrow I've got Tarp Henry to quiet down. See you in the mornin'."

Early the next day, nearer the western foothills of the Sierra Diablo Mountains and some forty miles north of Van Horn, a young Mexican *pastor* drove his flock of blatting woolies into a cool green hollow where there was a good spring. Turning his shaggy little pony loose to graze, and making sure that his charges were getting their fill of the good grass, he proceeded to amuse himself in various ways. He searched for berries, dug out succulent edible roots, turned over small boulders to study the activities of grubs and beetles and watched the play of birds and little animals.

Finally he climbed the long western slope of the hollow to the ridge crest and sat down at the edge of a thicket. Below where he sat and less than a fifth of a mile distant, wound a trail. A trail that forked about a mile to the north. One branch turned westward toward the *hacienda* of his patron, *Don* Ramon Cevera. The other trended slightly east and bored in a northerly direction through the lower ranges of the Sierra Diablos to eventually reach the wild mountain region of New Mexico.

THE BOY gazed down the slope, indolently thoughtful in the warm sunshine. He leaned forward a little in his nest of growth as he thought he saw movement in the chaparral that flanked the trail on the west. But though he watched closely in the hope of sighting a deer or a bear, he saw nothing further and, after a while, lifted his glance and gazed southward.

Again he hunched forward a trifle. Far to the south he did see movement—moving dots that soon resolved into two horsemen and a led mule. Idly he watched their approach with eyes rendered abnormally keen through much gazing across the wide vistas.

"Ha!" he suddenly exclaimed aloud. "The *Senor* Crane and the *Senor* Price. They come to buy the sheep from the *patron*, as they promise."

With mild interest he watched the approach of the two buyers and their mule, which he knew was loaded with money in gold and silver, the sheep owners not liking paper or checks. He leaned back comfortably against the growth, a smile of pleased anticipation on his dark face. The buyers always left presents for the herders after completing their business with the *patrons*.

Swiftly the two horsemen drew near. Now they were almost directly below where the *pastor* sat. He opened his lips to call a shrill greeting.

Then he sat with gaping mouth and wide eyes, rigid, quivering with horror.

From the growth to the west of the trail, smoke was mushrooming. The reports of the hidden guns slammed against the herder's ear drums like hammer blows. He moaned and panted as the forms of the buyers whirled from their saddles to lie soddenly in the dust of the trail. Sweat streaming down his face, the high-pitched moan keening from his throat in a wavering whisper, he watched men stream from the chaparral.

While some examined the dead men and rifled their pockets, others caught the frightened mule and tore open the pack on its back. One man darted back into the growth and reappeared leading five horses. The money from the pack was swiftly transferred to saddle pouches that soon bulged fatly. Then the five men, whose faces were almost hidden by muffling neckerchiefs and low-drawn hatbrims, mounted the horses and rode north wtihout a backward glance at the two forms sprawled in the trail.

The Mexican boy, cowering in the growth, too paralyzezd with horror to move a muscle, watched them pass the

forks and follow the trail that veered into the hills. Even after they were out of sight he still crouched against the brush and stared and stared. Long minutes after the killers had vanished from his range of vision he wormed back through the chaparral and fled down the slope to the bottom of the hollow, voicing prayers to the saints. He caught his pony, mounted and sent the little animal south and east to Van Horn at top speed.

CHAPTER V

Heavy Odds

JUST AS Tarp Henry and his hands were entering the sheriff's office, the Mexican *pastor* crashed down the street on his foam flecked, blowing pony. They whirled quickly around at the sound of his shrill voice.

"*Senor* Sheriff!" he screamed. "*Senor* Sheriff!"

Followed a torrent of incoherent Spanish as he flopped from the near exhausted animal's back and bolted past Henry and through the open door.

"Hold it!" roared the sheriff, who had leaped to his feet at the sound of the tumult outside. "What's the matter? What you want? Tighten your cinches, *muchacho*, and talk sense!" He grabbed the boy's scrawny shoulder and gave him a shake.

"The *Senor* Crane! The *Senor* Price!" wailed the *pastor*, moaning and gurgling in his throat.

The sheriff swore in exasperation. Jim Hatfield took over. He grasped the boy gently by the arm and led him to a chair. "Now tell us about it, feller," he said.

The kindly smile and the level eyes filled with understanding quieted the boy. His story came out, in panted sentences, but coherently. The sheriff stormed pro-

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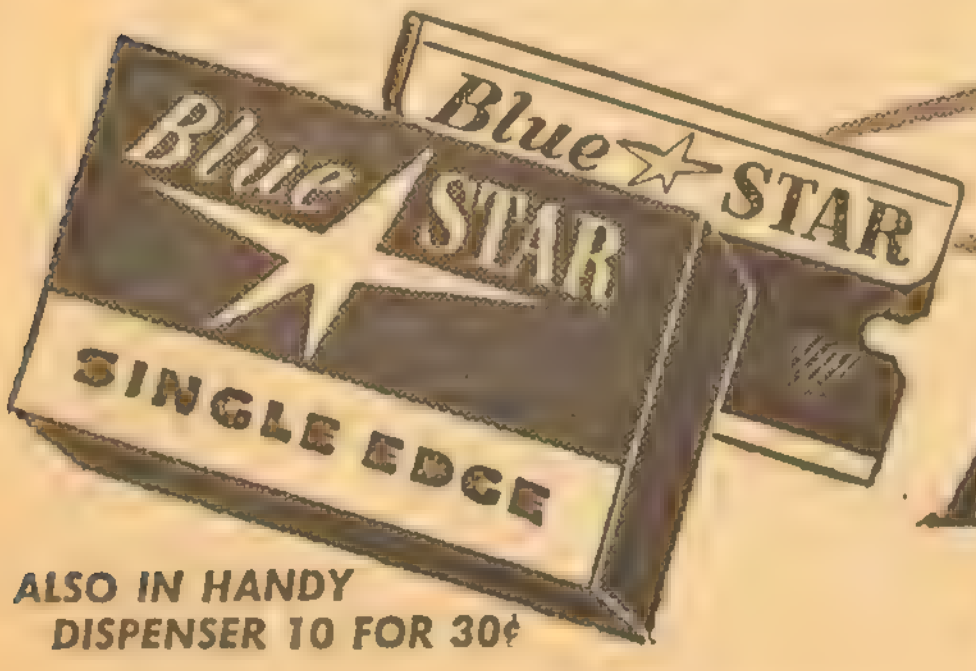

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fanity, which was ably abetted by old Tarp Henry.

"I knew both them fellers," said the rancher. "They did a lot of buyin' from me, too. They always packed along a hefty passel of dinero, especially when they were buyin' sheep or goats. The Mexicans like hard money."

"I knew 'em, too," said the sheriff. "Reckon most everybody in the section did. A salty pair of gents but square shooters." He reached for his gun belts.

"Hold the inquest till I get back, Tarp," he said. "I'll ride up there right away, but I reckon it won't be much use, with the start those hellions got."

"Just a minute, Sheriff," said Hatfield. He turned to the boy. "You say they rode north by the hill trail?"

"*Si, Senor,*" replied the *pastor.* "The trail that leads to New Mexico."

"And you are sure they didn't spot you?"

"*Senor,*" the boy declared with conviction, "had they done so, I would not be here to tell you."

"Reckon that's right," Hatfield agreed. "Sheriff, those devils will think that there were no witnesses to what they did, and they'll know there's small chance of anybody happening along that little used trail any time soon. They'll figure they've got plenty of time to get in the clear. If they're heading for New Mexico, and I'd say they are, they have a long ride ahead of them. The chances are they'll camp out somewhere in the hills tonight. If that's so, we'll have a plumb good chance to run them down before morning. We'll take our time and save our horses. With good luck we should be able to catch them up at their camp before daylight. Five of them, the boy said. Reckon you and I and your deputies will be enough to handle the chore."

"Like hell it will!" snorted Tarp Henry. "I'm comin' along and my two boys are comin' too. I want to be in on this."

"But, Tarp," protested the sheriff, "you've already ridden sixty miles today, and at your age!"

"My age, hell!" bawled Henry. "I'm younger than you, you decrepit old fossil! I'll be goin' strong when your setter is draggin' the ground. Get up fresh horses and we'll show you a thing or two about ridin'!"

Hatfield chuckled. He had taken an instant liking to the crusty old cattle king.

"You're in," he told Henry. "Suppose you and your hands get the horses ready while the sheriff and I grab off a bite to eat. There's no rush. I'll have some chuck packed to take along, too. We're liable to need it. All right, let's go."

EVERYBODY got busy. No one stopped to question the orders given to the sheriff of the county and its most prominent citizen by this tall, level-eyed cowboy who apparently had usurped all the authority in sight. They obeyed without comment. Half an hour later the posse rode out of town. Later a wagon would follow to bring in the bodies of the slain buyers.

"I'm plumb glad to have you along," Sheriff Rader told Hatfield, in an aside. "Technically speakin', I don't pack any authority over there. It's in Hudspeth county, Sheriff Potter's section."

Hatfield knew this to be true, but county lines were rather indefinite as to location, and for a Western peace officer to be too much of a stickler about such matters would give the owlhoots an undue and ill deserved advantage.

"We've no time to send for Potter," he told the sheriff. "And if it comes to a showdown, for some reason or other, I'll come to the front for you. The Rangers pack authority wherever they happen to be."

The sun had set and the western sky was a riot of color over the mountain peaks when the posse reached the spot where the bodies of Crane and Price, the murdered buyers lay stiffened in the dust.

"Shot to pieces," growled the sheriff, his eyes hard and cold. "The same bunch that did for the salt diggers and your boys, Henry. They sure take no chances. As snake-blooded a bunch of hyderphobia

skunks as I ever heard tell of. Well, there's nothin' we can do here, so we might as well be ridin'. Goin' to be dark mighty soon and I'm scared we'll have our work cut out for us. Let's go."

The shadows were already deepening when they entered the hills. The trail at first ran along a trough between two ridges, but soon began zig-zagging up slopes and down sags. Jim Hatfield quietly took the lead, riding a few paces ahead of his companions.

"We've got to do some careful trailing," he said. "There's always the chance that they turned off somewhere. Keep your eyes skinned for any forks. And use your ears and noses. If they made camp sooner than we figure and we stumble onto them unexpectedly, we're mighty liable to get a reception we won't like. Keep sniffing for smoke. The smell of burning wood carries a long way in this clear air."

"Don't see how you figure to notice a fork," grumbled the sheriff. "Dark as a stack of black cats in here."

"There is growth on either side," Hatfield pointed out. "If there is an opening in it where the trail branches, it will show gray in the starlight. Mighty lucky there are no clouds tonight."

"No moon, either," grunted Henry. "That would help, but I don't see how we can arrange for one at such short notice."

"I'm counting on them riding steadily until dark," said Hatfield. "They would make pretty good speed, the chances are, and the rate we'll have to go should catch us up with them somewhere close to dawn. That's what we want to hope for. Hit them just as it's getting light and we should get the jump on them. And you're wrong about the moon, Henry. There'll be one almost directly overhead a couple of hours past midnight."

Progress was slow but steady. Mile after mile was covered, with the trail flowing steadily onward, its direction north with a slight eastward trend.

"We must be getting close to the north terminus of the Diablos," Hatfield remarked some time after midnight. "Then, if I recall right, there'll be a mess of hills and ridges between the Diablos and the Sierra Prietas on the west."

"That's right," said Tarp Henry, who was thoroughly familiar with the section. "This track runs just a mite west of my holdin's. Cuts across Slade Walters' Runnin' W spread, in fact.

"Maybe that bunch ain't headin' for New Mexico, after all," he added significantly.

SHERIFF RADER grunted something unintelligible. Hatfield said nothing, but his black brows drew together. Henry's implication was plain.

Hatfield was right about the late moon. Another hour and it was directly overhead, pouring down a flood of silvery light. And twenty minutes later Hatfield pulled to a halt. Directly ahead the trail forked, the main branch flowing north, the other veering to the east.

"Got to look things over carefully here," the Lone Wolf said as he dismounted. "The rest of you stay back and don't mess up the tracks."

He walked slowly toward the forks, scanning the ground intently, stopping from time to time to examine the prints more closely.

"What does he expect to see in this light?" grumbled one of the Bradded H cowboys.

"If there's anything to see, he'll see it, I'll bet a hatful of pesos on that," grunted Tarp Henry. "I've a notion that jigger can see in plumb dark. I never saw such a pair of eyes as he's got. They seem to go right through you. Who is he, anyhow, Rader, and where'd he come from?"

"He used to be one of Pink Higgins' hands," replied the sheriff.

Tarp Henry stared. "For the love of Pete!" he exploded. "One of the Horrel-Higgins bunch, eh? Shades of Billy the Kid and Sam Bass! But we get some prize characters in this section!"

"I've a notion you're liable to be sort of glad we got this one, before the last brand is run," predicted the sheriff.

"Maybe," Henry replied dubiously, "but I don't go much for them perfessional

gun slingers. You never can tell how they'll bust loose. I've a notion that feller's plumb bad when he gets started, Wade."

"Uh-huh, you can say that over a couple of times, or I'm a heap mistook," the sheriff said dryly, "but I've a notion he always starts in the right direction. Come on, he's callin' us to come ahead."

Hatfield was standing a little way down the east fork of the trail, tall and commanding in the moonlight, when the posse came up.

"Did they turn off here?" the sheriff asked eagerly.

"No," Hatfield replied. "They kept right on riding north, after stopping for a while. But," he added grimly, "five more riders came up the east fork and joined with them here. All ten rode north."

The sheriff swore incredulously. Tarp Henry tugged his whiskers and added a few remarks of his own.

"You sure?" demanded Rader.

"Plumb sure," Hatfield replied. "Get down and come here and I'll show you.

"See?" he said, when the bewildered sheriff paused beside him. "Plain enough, isn't it?"

"It is after you point it out," conceded Tom Rader. "Yes, darned if you aren't right. What in blazes does it mean?"

"I don't know," Hatfield admitted, "except that we've got our work cut out for us. Lucky we brought along Henry and his men. This was no chance meeting, Tom. The first bunch pulled up at the forks and waited till the others joined with them. The hoof marks show that plainly. They waited quite a while. I understand now why the first bunch loafed on the way up here. That was puzzling me. They had a meeting arranged right here. After the others joined up and they all headed north, they speeded up a lot. Apparently heading for some place definitely. Wouldn't be surprised if it was the spot they'd picked to spend the night."

He paused, eying the trail, the concentration furrow deepening between his brows. A sure sign the Lone Wolf was doing some hard thinking.

"Wait here a minute," he said. "There's something that's puzzling me. It seems there was still another rider—going it by himself. I'll take a look."

He walked slowly along the east fork, stooping from time to time, to where the trail curved around a bristle of chaparral. At the curve he halted.

"Come here," he called to the sheriff.

The old peace officer hurried forward, muttering under his mustache.

"There was another jigger," Hatfield said. "Right here he pulled up and backed his cayuse into the brush. I'm willing to bet he was trailing the five who came from the east. He holed up when they joined the other bunch at the forks. After they rode on, he came ahead again. Yes, he was trailing them, and being mighty careful about it, too."

"And what in red-hot blazes does that mean?" the sheriff demanded wrathfully.

Hatfield chuckled. "Your guess is as good as anybody else's," he admitted. "The only thing I can say is we've sure got to keep our eyes skinned and our ears open. No telling what we'll run into before the finish. All right, let's get going north again. And be ready for anything. And don't forget the odds are against us now. Looks like eleven to seven, the way I figure it."

"Sounds like a blasted crap game," growled the sheriff. "Here's hopin' we don't throw snake-eyes!"

Hatfield chuckled again, and forked Goldy. "Anyhow, we're holding the dice, or at least I think we are," he said.

CHAPTER VI

Lead and Flame

FOR several miles Hatfield led the posse at a fast pace. Then he slowed down and proceeded with caution. The moon was low in the west now and the

brush flanked trail was very shadowy. Hour after hour passed and they saw nothing save the lonely stars above and heard nothing but the whisper of the wind through the branches. The possemen grew nervous and ill at ease.

It was jumpy work, pacing their horses slowly through the dark and not knowing what each bend in the trail might bring forth. Even the salty old sheriff muttered under his breath and tugged his mustache, while Tarp Henry's continual stroking of his bushy beard gave notice of nerves stretched to the breaking point.

At length the sudden boom of a gun would have been a welcome relief from the crawling anticipation and the numbing effect of the dead dark hour before the dawn. Only the Lone Wolf rode on unconcernedly, lounging easily in his saddle, his steady eyes probing the gloom ahead.

The sky overhead was graying with the first light of dawn when Hatfield suddenly voiced a low warning. Instantly the posse pulled to a halt.

"Smell it?" Hatfield breathed to the sheriff. "It's very faint, but it's wood smoke."

The sheriff sniffed. "You're right," he whispered back. "Their camp must be close, for the fire would have died down by now. What we goin' to do?"

"Leave the horses," Hatfield directed. "We'll slide ahead on foot. That's our only chance to get the jump on them. Easy, now. No noise. Your cayuses will stand?"

There was muttered assent. The posse unforked and glided ahead, cautious step by cautious step.

"Blast it!" Hatfield breathed, "the brush is thinning out and getting low. Keep down, and take it easy."

Progress slowed to a crawl. Soon any able-bodied snail would have left the whole bunch standing. The sky was brightening and objects were beginning to take form. The growth had dwindled to a straggle of low bushes intertwined by what appeared to be wild grape vines. Again Hatfield halted, the others crowding behind him.

"Look ahead," the Lone Wolf breathed. "There's the campfire or I'm a heap mistook. See that glow?"

"You got eyes like a cat," mouthed the sheriff. "A dead, rotten animal or a damp dead stump would give off that much light, but I can see it now."

"Fan out on either side," Hatfield whispered. "Sneak ahead behind the bushes and keep down. When the ball opens, every man get busy. Don't take any chances. It's a snake-blooded outfit. But I'd sure like to get a prisoner or two. Some paper-backed gent might talk and give us some leads. All right, let's go. They're sleeping around the fire. I can make out the blanket rolls. Try and get into easy shooting range. And wait till I give the signal. We'll give 'em a chance to surrender."

Silently and with the utmost caution, the posse fanned out and crept forward. Hatfield glided along the edge of the trail, where the shadows were deepest. He loosened his guns in their sheaths, tensed for instant action. Step by slow step the posse advanced, careful not to dislodge any stone or break any twig. The forms around the almost dead campfire lay without sound or motion. Hatfield congratulated himself that everything was going like clock work. And then the unexpected happened.

A CLUMP of bush jutted out into the trail. Hatfield crept around it, and came face to face with a man lounging against a mesquite trunk. Instantly a blood curdling yell seemed to fill heaven and earth as Hatfield lunged forward a split second too late to close his hands on the watcher's throat. The camp galvanized into whirling activity.

"Let 'em have it!" roared Sheriff Rader, realizing that the chance for a surprise attack was gone. The night exploded in a roar of gunfire. There was a terrific crashing and smashing as the owlhoots dived for cover, the posse's bullets storming after them. Back and forth through the shadows spurted the red flashes. Cries,

curses, the thud of falling bodies and the screams of the wounded blended in a horrific pandemonium to affright the paling stars. Shadowy figures could be seen darting here and there amid the tangle of brush and trailing vines.

Sheriff Rader charged forward, shooting with both hands and roaring encouragement to his men. Tarp Henry let off a rebel yell that set the leaves to quivering. The others were firing as fast as they could pull trigger.

Jim Hatfield had his hands full. The sentry was a huge man and seemed to be made of steel wires. Hatfield had clamped his gun hand against his side but had no chance to draw his own Colts. Back and forth they reeled, striking, wrestling, breath coming in panting gasps, lips writhed back from gleaming teeth, eyes glaring. It was a furious death struggle amid the brush and the trailing vines and the flickering shadows.

There was the flash of a knife. Hatfield lunged with his free hand, caught a corded wrist and turned the blow aside. The steel ripped through his sleeve and barely grained the flesh of his shoulder. An arm like the trunk of a tree wrapped around his neck. Lurching and straining, the pair battled breast to breast. Hatfield stepped on a rolling stone, went off balance, floundered and reeled. The wrist was whipped from his grasp as he went down, dragging the owlhoot with him. The man yelled a curse, leaped to his feet. The gleaming knife swept downward in a vicious blow.

Hatfield hurled himself aside and ducked under the descending arm, which glanced off his shoulder. He crouched, lunged forward and caught the other around the knees. Exerting every ounce of his giant strength, he surged erect and whirled the owlhoot over his head.

Around and around he whirled the screaming man and as he felt his grip on the writhing figure loosening, he let go.

The owlhoot shot through the air like a stone from a sling. There was a sodden, crunching sound as his head hit the trunk of the nearby tree. His limp body flopped to the ground.

Hatfield leaped forward, gripping his guns, but the man lay without sound or motion. His skull was shattered like an egg shell and he was dead when Hatfield reached him.

All around was yelling and shooting and the crashing of brush. Hatfield whirled and glanced about. Directly ahead ran the ribbon of trail, glowing wanly in the strengthening light. And far down the trail a single rider was urging a tall bay horse at top speed.

Hatfield jerked his guns, then slammed them back into the holsters. The distance was too great.

"And I'll bet a peso that's the big he-wolf of the pack!" he swore wrathfully. He whistled a shrill and piercing note. Hoofs thudded on the trail behind. A moment later Goldy came charging up in answer to his master's call.

Hatfield flung himself into the saddle. His voice rolled in thunder through the uproar amid the brush:

"Trail, Goldy, trail!"

THE great sorrel shot forward, snorting. His iron shod hoofs drummed the trail. His sinewy legs shot backward like pistons as he literally poured his long body over the ground. Hatfield settled himself in the hull and gave all his attention to riding. Behind him the sounds of conflict were lessening. Sheriff Rader was whooping triumph and evidently had the situation well in hand.

For nearly two miles the trail ran straight through a straggle of low growth. Then it curved into the dark mouth of a canyon. The fugitive was more than half a mile distant now, a heaving blotch against the gray track.

"And if he makes it into that hole, the chances are he'll give me the slip," Hatfield growled. "Trail, Goldy, trail!"

Gallantly the golden horse responded, and Hatfield's spirits rose with each giant stride. The big bay was a splendid animal, but he was no match for the great sorrel. Yard by straining yard, Goldy closed the distance. Hatfield calculated, estimated. Grimly he reached down and

drew his heavy Winchester from the saddle boot snugged beneath his left thigh.

"Notion I can do it now," he muttered. "But I'll give the hellion a chance to pull up. Steady, feller."

Instantly the sorrel's gait smoothed off. Hatfield clamped the rifle butt to his shoulder. His eyes glanced along the sights.

Smoke spurted from the muzzle. He saw the fugitive wince away from the whining lead. He fired again, saw the rider's figure jerk convulsively.

"He heard that one, all right, and came mighty nigh feeling it, too," the Ranger growled. "Okay, feller, I'll give you one more chance and if you don't pull up, you'll get it. Steady, Goldy."

He aimed with the utmost care, chose exactly the right moment and squeezed the trigger. The quarry was now only about three hundred yards distant, point-blank range from the long gun.

The report slammed back and forth among the tree trunks. Smoke spurted. The rider's hat sailed through the air. Hatfield swore in paralyzed astonishment.

Over the rider's shoulders tumbled a mass of red-brown, glowing curls from which the strengthening light struck golden glints. The rider turned in the saddle. Hatfield had a glimpse of a white, terrified face that was vaguely familiar.

"For the love of Pete!" Hatfield yelped. "The Terlingua dance hall girl!"

In blank amazement, he lowered the smoking rifle. The split reins slipped from where he had tucked them under his knee and went whipping to the ground. One wrapped around Goldy's flying front leg, threw him off balance. He floundered, reeled, planted a hoof on a loose stone and went down in a heap. Hatfield had barely time to free his feet from the stirrups and hurl himself in the clear as the sorrel hit the ground with a thud.

Hatfield saved himself from a crushed leg but he landed with a force that half stunned him and knocked every ounce of breath from his body. For moments he lay writhing and gasping, trying to pump some air into his tortured lungs. When he at last managed to sit up and glare ahead, the girl on the bay horse was nowhere in sight.

Hatfield got painfully to his feet. Goldy was already erect, snorting disgustedly, but to the Ranger's fervent relief, he appeared to have taken no hurt from his tumble.

Hatfield picked up his fallen rifle and mounted.

"Let's go, feller," he growled. "We'll have a look-see into that canyon, but I've a prime hunch it'll just be wasted time. Now if this don't beat anything I ever heard tell of! What was that girl doing with such a bunch of sidewinders? Now I'll believe anything's liable to happen in this up-ended section of hell we've gotten ourselves into."

WRATHFULLY he rode on and entered the canyon. The floor was hard and stony and showed no hoof marks. A little farther on a side canyon opened into the main gorge. Then another and another, into any of which the fugitive could have turned. Hatfield rode on for a mile farther and gave up. With a disgusted oath he turned Goldy and headed back for the scene of the morning battle.

As he rode back along the trail, he studied the prints left by the bay horse and noted something of interest. Two calks were broken from one front iron, leaving a distinctive pattern.

"Something to remember," he muttered, "but I'd sure like to know just where that girl fits into the picture. She sure didn't impress me as the sort to hang out with a bunch of owlhoots. But I reckon you never can tell. But why in blazes did she hand me that warning the other night if she's tied up with the pack?"

When Hatfield reached the owlhoots' camp, he found the fight over. Hank Blivens was tying up a punctured arm. The other deputy had a bullet gashed cheek. The sheriff suffered from a nicked shoulder that was painful but otherwise of little consequence. Over to one side lay a still form covered with a blanket.

"One of my boys," Tarp Henry said heavily. "Got it dead center. But he had quite a bunch stampin' out a trail for him when he took the Big Jump. Nine of the devils scattered around."

"Know any of them?" Hatfield asked.

"Nope," grunted Henry. The sheriff also shook his head. "And the horses pack skillet-of-snakes burns that don't mean anything," he added.

"I ain't surprised that we don't know any of 'em," remarked Henry. "All the spreads hereabouts have been hirin' new hands of late. Hired a few myself."

"Did any of them talk before he passed on?" asked the Lone Wolf.

"I got to one what was still breathin'," said the sheriff. "But all I got out of him was a string of curses before he cashed in. Tough hombres, all right."

"You say there are nine of them?" Hatfield questioned. "Then that means that two got away. The one I chased and another. Sure he isn't holed up somewhere around?"

"Reckon not," said the sheriff. "There's only nine horses."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully. "And I've a notion," he said slowly, "that one who got away is the big boss of the pack, the one we want most. A bad break. Funny nobody noticed him streaking off. He sure didn't take the trail and he could hardly have made it through the brush on horseback without being seen."

"Sure looks that way," agreed the sheriff.

"Which means he left before the row busted loose," Hatfield deduced. "Uh-huh, there's a mighty good chance the brains of the outfit got away."

"How about the one you chased?" asked Henry. "Did you do for him?"

"I shot a hole through a hat," Hatfield replied briefly. "Then Goldy took a tumble and put us out of the running. Did you find the money they took from the buyers?"

The sheriff swore wrathfully. "All them hellions had plenty of dinero in their pockets, but the saddle pouches were empty," he said. "And you'll recollect the Mexican kid said they stuffed the money in the pouches when they took it off the mule. I've a hunch the two what got away packed off most of the cash."

HATFIELD nodded agreement and began examining the bodies of the dead owlhoots.

"Five of these jiggers are Apache breeds," he announced. "Yes, Indian and Spanish blood, I'd say."

"Look it, all right," agreed Henry. "Did you ever see an ornerier lookin' gang? Just the sort to pull the kind of things they been doin'. Uh-huh, these over here are breeds, all right. Wonder what that means, if anything?"

"I'd say it means one thing, from what I've been told lately," Hatfield said. "It means they didn't work for the Running W. I understand Slade Walters has no use for folks with Mexican blood."

"Reckon that's so," Henry admitted grudgingly, and added, "but sometimes a feller changes his mind about things, particularly if it's to his interest to do so."

Hatfield refrained from arguing the point with the stubborn old rancher. And he was forced to admit there was a certain logic in what Henry said.

"Well," said the sheriff, "reckon we might as well head for town. Rope what's left of those horned toads onto the horses and we'll take 'em along with us."

"But first suppose we cook a mite of breakfast," suggested Tarp Henry. "There's plenty of chuck scattered around, aside from what we brought along. All this shootin' made me hungry, and we got a day's ride ahead of us. I figure to eat my next meal from a mantelpiece."

"Me, too," groaned the sheriff. "I don't feel over much like settin' right now."

After the meal was finished, the grim cavalcade set out for town. When they reached the forks of the trail, Hatfield called a halt.

"Want to take a look at something," he announced, and rode down the east fork to the bend, where he dismounted and studied the ground intently for several minutes."

"Find out something?" Sheriff Rader asked when he rejoined the posse.

"Yes," Hatfield replied soberly. "The one I chased was the rider who appeared to have been trailing the five that rode in from the east to meet the others."

CHAPTER VII

The Terlingua Girl Again

COMPLETELY worn out, the posse got back to Van Horn after sunset. But if it had not been for the depressing presence of the slain cowboy's body, its members would have been in a jubilant mood.

"We're thinnin' out the devils," said the sheriff. "A few more chores like this one and we'll be shed of 'em."

"Not as long as the brains is still running around loose," Hatfield reminded him. "You're never shed of that sort of a snake till you smash the head. It grows another body too darn fast. Well, you gents can stay up all night, if you want to, but I'm going to eat something and go to bed."

"Good notion," agreed the sheriff. "We'll hold that inquest tomorrow, if we can take time off from collectin' bodies."

As the Lone Wolf's tall form passed out the door, Tarp Henry turned to Rader.

"Tom," he said, "just who is sheriff of this county, anyhow?"

"Used to think I was," Rader returned dryly. "Anyhow, I got elected."

The inquest was held late the following afternoon. Word of the slaying of the two popular buyers, Crane and Price, had quickly gotten around and the town was crowded with people from all over the section and more were continually riding in. Van Horn seethed with rumors of more trouble to come.

The Mexicans in the River Villages are

[*Turn page*]

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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boilin'," said an informant who had ridden over from the west. "They're makin' threats over there. Don't reckon it will amount to much, but it'll be a good notion for folks here to keep away from Elizario and Ysleta for a while. And Sierra Blanca is nigh as bad. Lots of 'em over there and more driftin' in all the time. They seem to figure that there's where the trouble will be, if trouble really breaks."

"Sheriff Potter of Hudspeth county is a good man," someone said. "Reckon he can handle anything that busts loose."

"The sheriff of El Paso county was a good man, too, when the big row busted loose over there durin' the Salt War, years ago, but he didn't amount to much," was the reply. "What can a sheriff and a few deputies do against a couple of hundred Mexicans on the prod? What we need is the Rangers."

The inquest did not take long and the verdict was brief and to the point. It "allowed" that the Bradded H cowboys met their death at the hands of parties unknown and advised the sheriff to run down the drygulchers as quickly as possible. The puncher killed in the raid on the owlhoot camp in the Sierra Diablos was dealt with in like manner. Hatfield, the sheriff and the other members of the posse were commended for a good chore well done. The two buyers, Crane and Price, were considered satisfactorily avenged and regret was expressed that two of the outlaws escaped, and the hope that a loop would be dropped on them soon. The dead owlhoots were not deemed worthy of mention or remark.

The crowd that had jammed the courthouse dispersed to gather in groups on corners and in the various saloons. Dark predictions of trouble to come were voiced. And a rumor spread, beginning nobody seemed to know where, that somebody had already gotten control of the salt flats via a land grant and would soon close the lakes to all comers, with the intention of levying a fee against every *fanega* or bushel of salt removed.

"And that will mean trouble, sure as shootin'," was the general consensus.

HATFIELD and the sheriff tried to track the rumor down to its source, and failed signally.

"I don't believe it's so, but somethin' is in the wind," declared Sheriff Tom Rader. "One thing is certain, the oilers believe it's so. Hatfield, I don't like it. And, by the way, Tarp Henry was talking to me about you. He hankers to sign you on with his outfit, if you'll take over the chore. What do you think of that?"

"I may take him up on it," Hatfield replied. "After all, I've got to have some reason for hanging around the section. But I want to think it over first."

"He's lookin' for you," said the sheriff. "Might be a good notion to have a talk with him. And I've got somethin' else to worry about. Slade Walters and some of his hands just rode into town. And that cowboy of Henry's is about half drunk and has been makin' big talk, Hank Blivens said. He's been more than hintin' that Walters and his bunch is responsible for all the trouble hereabouts and sayin' his boss thinks so, too. I told Blivens to find him and shut him up or I'd throw him in the calaboose till he sobers up."

"And don't waste any time about it," Hatfield counseled. "That sort of talk can start trouble quicker than anything else. I'm going over to the Terlingua for something to eat. You can find me there if you want me."

"I've a notion Henry is there now," said Sheriff Rader. "He was at the bar a little while ago. Try and get him to eat with you and then take him somewhere else. Walters usually shows up in the Terlingua, sooner or later, when he comes to town."

Hatfield found Tarp Henry at the bar, as the sheriff predicted. And it was plain to see that he had been sampling more than a little red-eye. He greeted Hatfield boisterously and readily consented to join him at supper. They were crossing the room to a table when Slade Walters walked in. Hatfield instantly saw that the Running W owner was in a cold rage. His jaw was set hard, his eyes glittered and his face was white with passion. He

walked straight up to Tarp Henry, halting within arms' reach of him.

"Henry," he said, his voice quivering with passion, "I've stood enough. Either put up or shut up."

With a bellow of wrath, Henry grabbed for his holster. Walters' hands flashed down with blinding speed.

The next instant Henry was half way across the room, flat on his back amid the ruins of a smashed table. Slade Walters, gripping his gun butts, was staring with unbelieving eyes into a rock-steady black muzzle, with the Lone Wolf's eyes, now the color of snow-dusted winter ice, back of the unwavering barrel.

As Tarp Henry afterward expressed it: "I was on the floor before I knew what hit me. I reckon Walters didn't know what hit him, either. Hatfield knocked me off my pins with one hand and drew with the other without either of us seein' how it was done. I've heard folks say that Slade Walters has the fastest gun hand in Texas. Seems they were sort of wrong."

Hatfield spoke to Walters, his voice quiet, his icy gaze never leaving the Running W owner's face.

"Walters," he said, "don't try it, or you won't have the use of your hand for a couple of months. Now get out of here, and stay out till you cool off. We've had enough of this nonsense."

Walters' features writhed with impotent rage. He dropped his hands from his guns, glared at Hatfield.

"All right," he said thickly, "but you won't have the drop on me next time."

"Walters," Hatfield told him, "I'll always have the drop on you, unless my back happens to be turned, and under those circumstances, I figure I won't have anything to worry about from you."

The rancher swallowed and glared. "Yes, you're right about that," he said. "I wish I *could* shoot some folks in the back, like I would a sidewinder."

JIM HATFIELD holstered his gun. Suddenly he smiled, his teeth flashing startlingly white in his bronzed face, his eyes clear green again, and sunny as summer seas.

"Walters," he said, "I've a notion even the snake would get given a fair run for his taw."

The ranchowner stared at him, swallowed, shook his head in a bewildered way and headed for the door. Hatfield turned and walked across to where Tarp Henry was picking himself up, very cautiously, under the muzzles of the sawed-off shotguns leveled across the bar by Pedro, Hans and Gormy and seeming to take in the whole room with their ominous regard.

"Come on," Hatfield told him, "let's eat."

"All right," growled Henry, "as soon as I pick some splinters out of my backside. Much obliged, Hatfield. You came nigh to bustin' my neck, but I reckon you saved me from eatin' lead. I wouldn't have had much chance against Walters."

"So I figured," Hatfield said as he led the way to a nearby table.

The Terlingua proprietors put up their shotguns. The room quieted down and soon the incident was forgotten. As Hatfield and Henry were discussing their food, a man entered and glanced keenly about. Hatfield noted that he was tall, broad-shouldered and very good looking, with pale eyes that seemed even paler in his swarthy face. His hair was raven-black and worn rather long.

Tarp Henry noticed the direction of Hatfield's gaze and glanced across the room. He let out a whoop of greeting.

"This way, Howard," he called. "Come on over and set."

The tall man approached the table with lithe, graceful strides and smiled down at Henry, his thin but well-formed lips twisting slightly at the corners.

"Howdy, boss?" he said dropping into a chair.

"Howard, this is Jim Hatfield, the feller who saw the boys did in up there by the pass," he introduced, "and he's considerable of a feller. Hatfield, I want you to know Howard Burton who just about runs my business for me."

Hatfield shook hands with Burton, across the table. Burton had a firm and powerful grip and his smile was ready as he acknowledged the introduction. His keen looking eyes regarded the Lone Wolf with interest.

Old Tarp immediately launched into an account of Hatfield's recent actions. Burton nodded appreciatively.

"Mighty glad you were here to break up the ruckus," he said. "Boss, you should know better than to tangle with Walters."

"The low-down rascal started it," growled Henry.

"So I gather," Burton admitted. "I'll look him up after I eat and try and cool him down. Chances are I can find him at the Ace-Full. He hangs out there when he isn't in the Terlingua."

"That rumhole!" snorted Henry. "All the hard characters of the section hole up there. You'd better leave Walters alone, Howard. You keep mixin' with him and sooner or later he'll get you over a barrel, see if he don't."

"Oh, I don't find him so bad, as I've told you before," returned Burton. "You may not agree with the things he does, but you'll have to admit he's got plenty of savvy. I find him interesting, and I've never had trouble talking to him."

"You will, before you've finished with him," Henry predicted darkly.

Burton smiled, and did not pursue the conversation further.

AS SOON as he finished eating, Burton stood up. "I'm going down the street to the Ace-Full," he told his employer.

"Better leave that snake-eyed hellion alone," Henry warned again. Burton shook his finely shaped black head, smiled pleasantly at Hatfield and left the room.

"A fine feller," said Henry, gazing after Burton. "Well, think I'll go to bed. Gettin' sleepy. Have a talk with you in the mornin'."

"That'll be fine," Hatfield said.

Henry stood up. "I'll amble over and see Hans and sign up for a room," he announced. He strode across to the bar and engaged the owner in conversation. A moment later he was back, grumbling profanity.

"They're plumb filled up," he said. "Not a room to be had, and I'm scared it's the same at every other place. Never saw such a crowd in town before."

"You can sleep in my room," Hatfield instantly offered. "There's a good double bed and I reckon we can stand each other's snoring. Second door from the head of the stairs. I'm going to take a little walk and try and jolt down this hefty meal a mite. See you later."

Henry gratefully acepted the offer. They left the saloon together. Hatfield watched old Tarp stump up the stairs to bed. Satisfied that the rancher wouldn't get into any more trouble he sauntered down the street, glancing into various places, pausing to gaze at displays in shop windows. Some time elapsed before he stopped in front of a big saloon at the far end of the street. It was brightly lighted and sounded lively. Across the windows was the legend, ACE-FULL. It was the place Howard Burton mentioned as being Slade Walters' hangout when he was not patronizing the Terlingua.

Hatfield hesitated a moment, then pushed through the swinging doors. He glanced keenly about the crowded room. Neither Walters nor Burton was at the bar. He studied the tables and the games and did not find either. Between the dance floor which was well crowded, and the far wall, were more tables. Hatfield moved in that direction. From his great height he could look over the heads of most of the dancers. He still saw nothing of the men he sought. But abruptly he did see something else.

Weaving her way between the tables and the floor was a slender girl with a mop of reddish-brown curly hair. As if warned by some instinct, she turned in his direction. Her eyes widened as if with fright. Her red lips parted. Then she darted into a gathering of waiting dancers and he lost sight of her.

"The Terlingua girl, sure as blazes!" Hatfield muttered. "And she spotted me and trailed her twine pronto. Little lady,

you and I are going to have a talk or I'll know the reason why."

Swiftly but casually he circled the dance floor and reached the spot where he had last seen her. His searching gaze failed to sight her again.

"Where's she gone to?" he growled. "She couldn't have gotten across the room and out the door without me seeing her."

Then his keen glance noted a small door near where the orchestra sat on a raised platform. The door stood slightly ajar.

Hatfield strode to it, opened it wider and stepped out, closing it behind him.

Instantly he realized he had done a foolish thing. He was in a dark and narrow alley. He ducked instinctively as he heard a muttered curse, a low cry and a scuffling sound.

A gun blazed only a few yards distant. Hatfield heard the slug screech past his ear. In the flash he had a fleeting blurred glimpse of a face that somehow seemed familiar. And a flickering vision of a slender white hand gripping the barrel of the flame spurting gun.

In echo to the report came a horrified scream.

Hatfield slewed sideways, jerking his own Colt, but he dared not pull trigger for fear of hitting the girl. He took a desperate chance, stamped his foot hard and flattened himself against the wall of the building.

The unseen gun roared again. Hatfield sighted the bulk of the man who held it. The girl, to the right, was apparently struggling with him. Holding well to the left, Hatfield fired twice. A yelp of pain echoed the second report. Then the sky seemed to explode in leaping fire through which he heard the boom of the answering shot like a dozen thunderclaps merged together. He sagged against the wall, red flashes storming before his eyes, his brain whirling. Gasping, he fought against the waves of blackness that followed the streaking flame. Though the storm of bell sounds that dinned in his ears, he faintly heard a patter of swift steps fading down the alley.

CHAPTER VIII

Shots in the Dark

NEVERTHELESS Hatfield did not altogether lose consciousness, although moments passed before he could control his numbled faculties. Finally he staggered away from the wall and lurched down the alley just as the door behind him opened and a voice bawled a question. Swiftly, however, his strength returned and his shambling gait quickened. His head was clear, though throbbing painfully, when he reached the mouth of the alley a hundred yards or so farther on.

The alley ended in a straggle of chaparral stretching out onto the open prairie. Hatfield could see no movement, could hear nothing except a yelling up the alley he had quitted. With a muttered oath he headed for the street, keeping in the shadow of the growth. He remained in the shadow for a few moments when he reached it, rubbing his throbbing head. A few drops of blood oozed from beneath the hairline just above his left temple.

"Grazed me, and that was all," he growled. "But even the flick of a passing forty-five slug packs a hefty wallop. Well, I sure acted like a dumb yearling tonight, barging out that door without looking to see what might be waiting for me. That feller was waiting for the girl, no doubt about it. And if it hadn't been for her grabbing his arm, he would have drilled me. But where in blazes does *she* fit into the picture? Twice she's done me a big favor, for no apparent reason. The whole thing doesn't seem to make sense."

He rubbed his aching head and swore again. "And it wasn't the first time I saw that feller," he declared with conviction. "He sure looked familiar, in a vague sort of way. Just got a mite of a glimpse of him. But I'd seen him before somewhere, and not long ago, either. I'll bet on it."

A moment later he left the shadows and stepped onto the board sidewalk. He

decided not to reenter the Ace-Full and passed on the far side of the street. He also passed up the Terlingua and headed for the railroad station.

"Going to play a hunch," he muttered. "I'm sure not getting anywhere the way things are. One thing is sure for certain, somebody is deliberately trying to stir up trouble in this section. For what reason? That's the big question. I'm beginning to get a mite of suspicion but I need a few facts to bear it up. Here goes for a try at the facts."

He entered the railroad telegraph office, wrote out a message and handed it to the operator.

"Send it pronto," he said. "There should be an answer by this time tomorow night, or a little earlier. Hold the answer for me till I come for it. Leave instructions to that effect with the man who relieves you. And I reckon I don't need to tell you not to talk about it."

The operator, sworn to secrecy by the rules of his company, read the message and stared at the tall sender with much interest as he got busy with his key. The message was directed to Captain William McDowell, Ranger Post Headquarters.

Leaving the telegraph office, Hatfield decided to go to bed. "Hoping Henry doesn't snore tooo much," he chuckled as he mounted the stairs. "But tired as I am tonight, I reckon it won't much matter."

He entered the dimly lighted hallway, walking softly so as not to disturb the other sleepers, for the hour was late. He jumped a foot as a gun boomed with a muffled sound almost at his elbow. Followed a stentorian roar, a thudding of bare feet on the floor and a crashing fusillade of shots behind the closed door he had been just about to open.

BEFORE Hatfield could make a move, the feet thudded again and the door was flung open revealing Tarp clad in underclothes, his beard bristling, his eyes glaring. In his hand he held a smoking Colt. He recognized the Lone Wolf instantly.

"After the sidewinder, Hatfield!" he bellowed. "Downstairs, in the alley. I think I winged him."

Hatfield whirled and bounded down the stairs, gun out and ready. He whisked around the corner of the building and flattened against the wall. Directly in front of him was a big tree that shaded the side of the building. Under its spreading branches the dark was intense. Hatfield could see nothing, hear nothing. Cautiously he glided forward. Directly over his head was an open window through which filtered a dim light. An instant later old Tarp Henry thrust his head out the window.

"See anything of the coyote?" he yelled.

"Nothing down here I can see," Hatfield called back. "Wait till I look under the tree."

Cautiously he groped about, gun ready for instant action, and found nothing. Finally he took a chance and struck a match. Nothing was revealed save a broken bough lying on the ground beneath the window. He glided down the alley a way and still saw nothing. With a disgusted growl he retraced his steps to the head of the alley and stepped onto the sidewalk. The street was deserted and over the swinging doors of the Terlingua came a din that had evidently prevented the roisterers in the saloon from hearing the shooting, which doubtless would have attracted little attention anyway on such a turbulent night. He mounted the stairs to his room.

The door stood open and Henry had lit the lamp.

"What in blazes happened?" Hatfield asked.

"Hardly know myself," said Henry. "I slept a few hours and woke up. Reckon all the excitement today was too much for me, because I couldn't get back to sleep again. I got up, set down in that chair over there and lit my pipe. Figured a smoke might make me drowsy. Reckon it did, for I sort of dozed in the chair. All of a sudden a gun cut loose right under my nose, it seemed. I woke up all right. A feller was standin' on that big limb outside the window, lookin' in. I jumped up,

grabbed my gun off the table and cut loose on him just as he ducked out of sight. Thought I heard him sort of yelp, but wasn't sure. I was headin' out for the alley without my pants or boots, when I bumped into you."

Hatfield nodded. "Let's take a look around," he said. He crossed to the bed and glanced at the tumbled blankets from under which Henry had slid when he got up to smoke. The old rancher was evidently a quiet sleeper, for the blankets still lay humped up as they had covered his big form. Hatfield picked them up and shook them out.

"Pretty good shooting," he remarked quietly, pointing to ragged tears in both. "If you'd been under there, I've a notion you'd have an airhole in your hide about now."

Henry stared at the bullet-pierced covering and swore a crackling oath.

"The sneaking hyderphobia skunk!" he bawled. "Did he come back to finish the chore after he failed up down in the saloon?"

"Don't think so," Hatfield replied. "Chances are whoever made the try wasn't after you at all."

Henry stared. "What you mean by that?" he asked.

"Well," Hatfield replied dryly, "nobody but myself knew you were sleeping in this room, I'd say. I didn't mention it and I don't reckon you did before you went to bed. And I've been signed up for this particular room ever since I hit town."

"Then he was after *you*?" Henry said.

HATFIELD shrugged his shoulders. "What would you say?" he countered.

"I'd say that if you're to get out of this section alive, your luck had sure better hold," Henry replied. "If I was you I'd start ridin' tonight."

"Too sleepy," Hatfield smiled. "I'm going to bed. Lucky folks using the rooms either side of us hadn't gone to bed yet or were too drunk to notice the ruckus. Otherwise we'd be pestered with questions. And, by the way, let's don't talk about that happened here tonight. That may keep the hellions guessing."

"Good notion," Henry agreed. "And you say you're goin' to sleep? Not me, for a while yet, anyhow. I'm goin' to sit and smoke a while, in case that drygulcher, or some others of the same breed take a notion to come back for another try."

"Not much danger of that," Hatfield replied cheerfully. "Even if you didn't wing that jigger, and I don't reckon you did—I didn't see any blood spots—the chances are you gave him a scare that's got him running yet. Good night."

Hatfield slept soundly but awoke at an early hour. Old Tarp had finally lain down and was sleeping quietly when Hatfield slipped out of bed, dressed and went downstairs in search of some breakfast. He entered the Terlinqua where a cheerful rattling of dishes and delectable smells promised service for early patrons.

Seated at a nearby table was Slade Walters. His brows drew together as he sighted the Ranger but he waved his hand and called in not unfriendly tones:

"Come on over, feller, and set."

Hatfield accepted the invitation, dropping into a chair opposite Walters. He gave his order to a waiter and sat back, gazing at the Running W owner, who was regarding him with his alert eyes.

"Feller," Walters said, "I reckon I want to say much obliged for what you did last night. I was sort of put out at the time, but after I thought it over, I decided you did me a big favor. My temper got the best of me and I went off half-cocked when I spotted Henry. Reckon if you hadn't stopped me, I'd be sorry about now."

"Yes, I've a notion you would be," Hatfield answered. "About now you'd be facing a murder charge. From all appearances, you came in with the express purpose of killing Henry—a premeditated killing. That sort of thing is kind of hard to explain to a jury."

Walters nodded sober agreement. "I was boiling mad over the yarns Henry had been spreadin' around town and the

threats he had been makin' yesterday," he said. "When I run into him, I sort of saw red."

Hatfield regarded the ranch owner curiously.

"Walters," he said, "I don't think Henry spread any yarns or made any threats yesterday."

"You don't?" Walters returned incredulously.

"No," Hatfield repeated, "I don't. Perhaps he did in the past—he's a crusty old jigger—but after what happened over in the Diablos, I've a notion Henry did considerable thinking, and began to have doubts about the correctness of the opinion he held concerning you. He didn't say so in so many words, but some things he did say convinced me it was so. By the way, did anybody tell you they personally heard Henry make those threats?"

"No," Walters was forced to admit. "They just said they heard he was makin' 'em."

"A trifle indefinite, don't you think?" Hatfield asked.

WALTERS was forced to admit, albeit reluctantly, that it was so. Hatfield regarded him in silence for a moment.

"Walters," he said at length, "it appears to me that somebody is mighty anxious to have you kill Tarp Henry, or get yourself killed trying to do it."

The ranch owner stared. "But—but," he stuttered, "who in blazes would want to do that?"

"I don't know," Hatfield admitted frankly, "but I'm convinced it's true."

Walters jabbed his fork savagely into a hunk of steak.

"Now you got *me* bothered!" he growled.

Hatfield smiled slightly, and addressed himself to his food. He knew he had sown seeds of doubt in Walters' mind and was content to let them do a mite of sprouting.

Walters finished his meal and stood up. "I'm goin' home," he announced. "Been away quite a while. My old mother is alone in the house, except for the cook, and he's as much company as a bump on a log. I don't like Mother to get too lonely."

Hatfield liked him for that. He smiled, his strangely colored eyes all kindness.

"That's a good notion," he said.

"And I hope I'll see you again, feller," Walters said.

"Chances are you will," Hatfield replied. "I aim to stick around a while."

Walters hesitated, as if on the point of saying more, but apparently thought better of it. With a nod he left the room.

Tarp Henry put in an appearance shortly afterward.

"Got to spend another day in town," he said. "That boy who got killed over in the Diablos—Bob Russell—had a brother over to Fort Stockton. I wired him what happened and he'll be here to claim the body this afternoon. I want to be here when he gets in. We'll ride up to my place tomorrow, if it's okay with you?"

Hatfield nodded agreement. The arrangement worked in well with his plans.

The day passed without event. Shortly after dark. Hatfield repaired to the telegraph office.

"Got your answer for you, sir," the operator said respectfully.

Hatfield opened the mesage, which was signed by Captain McDowell. His black brows drew together as he read:

LAND CERTIFICATE RECENTLY ISSUED TO ONE SLADE WALTERS OF HUDSPETH COUNTY. EXTENSIVE ACREAGE.

Hatfield was familiar with the terms of such certificates, often issued for various "public services." Under its terms, the holder could "locate" the acreage called for on any part of the public domain.

Crumpling the message, Hatfield thrust it in his pocket. He thanked the operator and walked out frowning.

"And now I'm right back where I started," he growled disgustedly. "Beginning to look like Henry might be right, in some things. It appears Walters really is after the salt, and if he locates and closes the lakes, hell is going to bust loose

for fair. Well, I'll wait a little while and then I'll have a talk with Walters. Wonder if I can be misjudging that feller? And wonder who Simon Borracho really is? There's a Simon Borracho, all right, or some hellion that's going by that name. He's the one responsible for what has been happening hereabouts of late, no doubt about that. The big question is, who is he? Slade Walters? Doesn't seem to make sense, but if not, who else? Sure wish I'd got a better look at that devil who threw lead at me in the alley. I've a prime notion he is my man. And that girl. If I could only get hold of her for a while. But grabbing her would be like trying to put your finger on a flea. She's always one jump ahead of me. Well, I'll ride up with Henry tomorrow and get a look at the salt lakes on the way. Might be somebody nosing around up there. Might get a break."

BUT HATFIELD was doomed to disappointment. When he and Henry crossed the flats, late the following afternoon, the salt fields were lonely and deserted. The heat devils danced, the eerie mirages writhed and flickered. The shallow, saline lakes flashed back the red rays of the setting sun like wavy mirrors. A faint breeze whispered the grains of salt and sand. But the whole weird terrain was otherwise devoid of life or movement.

It was full dark when they reached the site of Henry's great ranchhouse. They unforked in the yard and old Tarp bellowed for a wrangler to come and care for the horses. As they approached the house, they could dimly make out the form of a man lounging on the veranda. Suddenly the man struck a match and, cupping it in his hands, applied the flame to the tip of a cigarette. The flicker of flame dimly illumined his features for an instant.

Jim Hatfield stiffened, his hands balling into iron-hard firsts. He faltered in his stride but instantly recovered himself and mounted the steps with Henry.

"Howdy, boss?" said Howard Burton. "See you got somebody with you. Oh, it's Hatfield. Howdy, Hatfield?"

"Yep, it's Hatfield," said old Tarp. "He's about decided to sign up with us for a chore of ridin'."

"Good!" Henry applauded without hesitation. "We need men like him."

Together they passed into the house, Burton talking with his employer. Hatfield was silent, his eyes smokily gray, the concentration furrow deep between them as he pondered the breath-taking discovery he had just made. For as the flare of the match fleetingly lighted Howard Burton's features, he had recognized the face he had seen in the glare of a blazing gun in the alley back of the Ace Full saloon two nights before.

CHAPTER IX

As Man to Man

WHEN the next day came Henry suggested that they look over his spread and allow Hatfield to get a lowdown on conditions. Hatfield was agreeable, and shortly before noon they set out, riding north by west across the wide valley swinging between two mountain ranges.

"A prime holding, all right," Hatfield said as, late in the afternoon, they paused to water their horses at a little stream. "Can't say as I ever saw a better."

Old Tarp's face glowed with the pride of accomplishment. "Yes, she's purty good," he admitted. "Wasn't so much when I took hold. My dad was a good man but sort of easy goin'. I made improvements. Diverted water and made good pastures out of poor ones. Planted trees on hillsides to conserve the soil and did other things. I grow my own alfalfa and wheat and corn and garden truck. Improved my stock by careful cross-breedin'." He glanced about with quiet satisfaction.

"You say Walters' holdings are to the west of here?" Hatfield observed.

"That's right," said Henry. "We're

purty close to my west line right now. That stretch over there, where you can see the hills comin' down from the north, is the holdin's of that Mexican family I told you about. The other side of that, Walters' range begins."

"Where's his ranchhouse?" Hatfield asked.

Walters gestured to the southwest. "See that hill shootin' up over there—the one with the flat top?" he said. "Walters' *hacienda* is right at the foot of that. About ten miles from here. Easy goin' across the flat land."

Hatfield contemplated the distant hill. He glanced at the westering sun and gathered up his reins.

"Think I'll ride over and see Walters," he announced. "Reckon I can make it by dark."

Tarp Henry looked his surprise. "What's the notion?" he asked.

"Just want to have a little talk with him," Hatfield evaded. "No, I don't figure to sign up with him. If I sign up with anybody in this section, it'll be with you, suh."

Henry nodded. "Want me to ride with you?" he asked doubtfully.

Hatfield shook his head. "Nope," he said. "I'd rather make this trip alone. Next time, maybe."

"Not likely," Henry disagreed. "Reckon Walters would meet me at the door with a scattergun."

Hatfield smiled. "I've a notion," he said slowly, "that the time will come when you and Slade Walters will be visiting back and forth regular."

"And maybe some time the sky will drop down and bust us all over the head!" snorted Henry. "Be seein' you when you get back, if you do. Hope you don't get shot."

Hatfield reached the base of the flat-topped hill just as the lovely blue dusk was sifting across the rangeland. He skirted the base and finally sighted a small but well built ranchhouse. It was getting late and nobody seemed to be about, but as he drew near he spotted a light glowing through a window. He let out a whoop and a moment later Slade Walters opened the door and peered out. He recognized the Ranger's tall form, outlined in the light streaming through the window, and called a welcome.

"Light off and cool your saddle," he invited. "Was just goin' to have a late snack. Everybody else has already eaten. I'll help you put up your critter. Then you can join me at supper."

HATFIELD enjoyed an excellent meal thrown together by a taciturn old fellow who regarded him suspiciously from under bushy gray brows.

"Ike don't trust nobody," Walters chuckled, interpreting Hatfield's amused glance. "I've a notion if he ever gets to Heaven, he'll suspect the other angels of havin' designs on his harp. But he's honest and a square shooter. Been with me for years."

After the meal was over, they sat together in the comfortable living room and smoked. Walters chatted pleasantly about range affairs and the recent happenings in the section. Hatfield was mostly silent, studying the rancher. Finally he pinched out his cigarette and bent his steady gaze on Walters' face.

"So you're figuring on locating the salt flats," he remarked without preamble.

Slade Walters almost leaped from his chair. He stared at Hatfield.

"How in blazes did you find that out?" he demanded. "How did you know?"

"It doesn't matter how, but I know," Hatfield returned briefly.

Walters bristled slightly. "Well, what of it?" he asked. "It's a good investment."

"And how about the folks who take salt from the lakes?" Hatfield asked. "The folks of the River Villages whose prosperity depends on the salt?"

Walters shrugged. "They'll have to keep out, or pay revenue on the salt they take," he replied. "After all, they have no right to it. They haven't anything but nesters' rights, and that doesn't count for much, under the law."

"Perhaps not, under man-made law which is ofttimes faulty," Hatfield said.

"But, Walters, are there not such things as right of priority, right of long custom and usage? Is there not a higher law, the law of ethics, the law governing decency and square dealing and consideration for others. I've a notion you learned about such things at your mother's knee, Walters."

The ranch owner tried to scowl, but looked uncomfortable instead.

"It's permissible for a man to make a profit on his investment," he growled.

"Yes," Hatfield instantly countered, "It is permissible for a man to expect a fair profit from his investment. It is not permissible for him to extract an exorbitant profit at the expense and suffering of others. It is permissible to develop the resources of our land. It is not permissible to withhold an unjust share for ourselves. It is permissible to hire men and profit from their labor. It is not permissible to rob them of the fruits of their toil."

Slade Walters, despite his somewhat turbulent life, was a man of strong religious convictions. He fidgeted in his chair.

"There are other things on the flats besides salt," he said, breaking the embarrassing silence. "There's mica and gypsum and copper out-croppin's. I intend to mine 'em. That'll give work to a lot of folks."

"But a large and immediate revenue would come from the salt," Hatfield observed. "That's what Howard Burton pointed out to you, isn't it?"

THIS time Walters really did jump. "How in blazes do you know Burton told me that?" he gasped.

"Guesswork," Hatfield replied. "True, isn't it?"

"Yes," Walters admitted, "it is."

"And it was Burton who first got you interested in salt and the flats?"

"That's right," Walters agreed.

"And it was Burton who sold you the idea of getting political control of the section?"

"Well," Walters evaded, "he sort of suggested somethin' like that. He pointed out that Tarp Henry aimed to get out of politics soon and that then the field would be wide open to anybody. I did a mite of talkin' around through the section."

"And rather successfully, I'd say, seeing as you were able to finagle that land certificate over at the capital," Hatfield commented. "Walters, if you close the lakes, there'll be trouble."

"Reckon I can take care of any trouble that comes my way," Walters declared belligerently.

"Perhaps," Hatfield admitted. "But it will also mean trouble for others. Are you prepared to shoulder that responsibility, Walters? You may find it difficult to wash the blood off your hands."

Walters was sweating now. Instinctively his glance dropped to his hands. He hurriedly thrust them out of sight under the table.

"How does Burton stand in this deal?" Hatfield asked suddenly.

"Why," replied Walters, thankful for the respite, "we're in it share and share alike. Burton is to handle the work angle. We drew up an agreement to that effect."

"Got a copy of that agreement handy?" Hatfield asked.

"Right here in this drawer," Walters replied.

"Mind if I have a look at it?"

Walters opened the drawer and drew forth a sheet of paper which he passed across the table. Hatfield took it and studied it for some minutes, in silence. He raised his eyes to the rancher's strained face.

"I see by the terms of this agreement," he said, "that if anything should happen to you, Burton assumes full control of the handling of the flats."

"That's right," said Walters. "He wanted that written in to protect his interest if something should happen to me."

"Got any heirs, Walters?" Hatfield asked.

"Only my old mother," said Walters.

"And how old is your mother?"

"She's close to eighty."

"So," Hatfield observed, "if something

should happen to you, Burton would not only assume control of the flats but he could expect very shortly to be in full possession, so far as all practical purposes are concerned. Seems to me this agreement is sort of one-sided."

Walters stared at the paper. "It does look sort of that way, now that you've pointed it out," he admitted. Suddenly he raised his eyes.

"Hatfield," he said, "just where do you come into this deal? Why should a range ridin' cowhand take such an interest in this affair? You speakin' for Tarp Henry?"

Hatfield stood up, smiling down at the rancher from his great height. He held out his hand.

"Figured I could depend on you," he said.

"And," added Walters, after they had shaken hands and sat down again, "in a day or two I'm goin' to see my lawyer and have a mite of a change made in this agreement. I don't like the looks of it the way it is."

CHAPTER X

The Showdown

IN ANSWER, Hatfield laid the star of the Rangers on the table between them. Slade Walters stared at the glittering symbol of justice and order and law. He did not seem particularly surprised.

"Might have knowed it," he said. "You do things like a Ranger, and you talk like one, too."

"But I'm not talking to you as a Ranger," Hatfield quickly replied. "Ranger authority has no control over your business arrangements, so long as you keep within the law. I'm talking to you as man to man, trying to make you see things in the right light."

"I know that," growled Walters, "but you've got me all worked up and bothered."

He got to his feet and paced the room. After several turns he came back to the table.

"Hatfield," he said, "I'm not goin' to close the lakes. I'm goin' to leave 'em open to all comers, just like they've always been. There's plenty of money to be made from the other mineral deposits in the flats. I'll be satisfied with that. Let the folks who've been handlin' the salt keep on handlin' it for all I care, so long as they don't interfere with my other projects. I suppose I'll have a row with Burton over it, but he'll have to do as I say. If he don't want to string along with me, I'll refuse to locate the flats. I hold the whip hand over him there."

EARLY the next morning Jim Hatfield was in a pleased frame of mind when he rode back to the Bradded H ranchhouse.

"Well," he chuckled, "I tied a knot in your tail last night, *Senor* Burton, though how I'm going to drop a loop on you I don't know, yet. Nice little snake-blooded scheme you worked out. The old owlhoot trick of getting two outfits on the prod against one another. Keep on horning Henry with things like happened down by Guadalupe Pass till he flies off the handle and braces Walters. Then Walters kills Henry and Henry's men kill Walters, or Walters goes to jail for a long term. Then you'd be sitting pretty to control the whole section. With that work agreement in your possession, and with the political situation under your thumb, you wouldn't have any trouble getting the land certificate transferred to your name. Well, it isn't working out just that way. Wonder where you'll bust loose next?"

He rode on, still conning over the situation in his mind. He was convinced that Burton was the mysterious Simon Borracho who had been robbing and killing throughout the section and also stirring up the Mexicans and Texas-Mexicans with rumors concerning the closing of the salt lakes.

"But what I'd like to know," he mused,

"is where does that girl fit into the picture? And I'm banking on her to lead me to Burton when he's pulling something. That is if I can only get a lead on her. Well, aside from saving me from getting my hide punctured a couple of times, she did me a big favor by tying Burton up with the bunch who drygulched the two buyers, Crane and Price. Burton was the jigger who got away with most of the loot, all right. He rode over from the east with the rest of his gang to meet up with the bunch who pulled the actual killing and robbery. For some reason the girl trailed him. But he gave her the slip somehow. She was still hanging around somewhere when we landed on the sidewinders. Then she hightailed."

When Hatfield got back to the Bradded H ranchhouse, he found Tarp Henry in the living room.

"Yes, I'll sign up with you, for a while, anyhow," he said when the rancher broached the subject.

At dinner, Hatfield covertly studied Howard Burton. Burton was pleasant and affable and smiled often, but it seemed to Hatfield that the smile never reached his pale eyes. They appeared utterly expressionless, unwinking, like the lidless eyes of a snake. And the glitter in their depths, Hatfield thought, was the glitter of madness.

An uneventful week followed. Hatfield was assigned the routine chores of a tophand, but he found his duties light. Henry's force of riders was far larger than his acreage warranted. A significant comment on the unrest of the section.

Howard Burton was much in evidence and Hatfield kept tabs on him to the best of his ability. However, there was little in Burton's actions to warrant suspicion, Hatfield was forced to admit. He was pleasant and affable and spent much of his time in the ranchhouse office.

Hatfield found time, a few days after signing up with Henry, to visit Slade Walters.

"I had a talk with Burton," Walters announced.

"Did he do considerable rearin'?" Hatfield asked.

A puzzled expression crossed Walters' face. "No," he said, "he didn't. He took it plumb calm. He agreed with me that there was no sense in rilin' the Mexicans by closin' the lakes. Agreed that the real value of the flats lay in the other mineral deposits, though it would take time and money to work 'em. I'm goin' to go ahead and locate."

"How about that agreement?" Hatfield asked.

"I brought that up," said Walters, "and Burton didn't kick a mite over the changes I suggested. I figure to see my lawyer soon and have 'em made."

JIM HATFIELD was as puzzled as Walters over Burton's unexpected reaction.

"Now what's that snake-eyed devil got up his sleeve?" he demanded of Goldy as he rode back to the Bradded H.

Goldy either didn't know or refused to divulge his knowledge. All Hatfield could get out of him was a snort that, somehow or other, sounded derisive to his rider.

Old Tarp Henry seemed to seek out Hatfield's company. It did not take the Lone Wolf long to discover that the old cattle king was a very lonely man.

"I can't talk much with the rest of my boys," he confided one evening. "They're all young hellions with their own interests. And Burton is always busy with one thing or another."

The following evening the Bradded H had visitors. Sheriff Tom Rader and two of his deputies rode in. The old peace officer looked tired and worried.

"We trailed a train of salt carts up to the lakes," he explained. "I figured something might bust loose and I might get a chance to line sights with the devils who have been raisin' the hell hereabouts of late. But nothin' happened. I decided to ride on up here and put a flea in you fellers' ears. Stay away from Sierra Blanca for a while. The Mexicans down there are on the prod for fair. It's purty

definite now that somebody is goin' to locate the lakes and close 'em to the salt traffic. Anyhow, the Mexicans believe it and they're boilin'. I figure nobody from this section is safe over there any more."

Later, Hatfield managed to draw the sheriff aside. "Rader," he said, "I can guarantee the lakes are not going to be closed. The flats are going to be located, yes, but the lakes will be left open and the salt traffic to Mexico will not be interfered with. Spread the word around."

"I'll do that," said the sheriff in relieved tones. "I'll ride over to Sierra Blanca in a day or two and talk with folks there. They'll believe what I tell 'em. Got to get back to Van Horn tomorrow, but the next day I'll ride to Sierra Blanca."

During supper, Tarp Henry made an announcement. "I aim to ride to town with you tomorrow, Tom," he said. "Hatfield, you'll come along, and we'll take some of the boys with us for company on the way back. I got some chores to attend to and there's no use puttin' 'em off."

Nothing eventful happened in the course of the ride to Van Horn the following day. They took it easy and arrived in town at sunset. After a good night's rest, Henry and Hatfield busied themselves with the chores that had brought the rancher to town, while the hands sought diversion of various sorts.

By noon the chores were all finished and Hatfield and Henry repaired to the sheriff's office, proposing to invite Tom Rader to join them in a surroundin'. Sheriff Rader was agreeable and they were preparing to cross the street to the Terlingua when a clatter of hoofs sounded outside. An instant later a wild-eyed man bounded through the door, gasping and sputtering.

"What's the matter, John?" shouted Wade, recognizing one of Sheriff Potter's deputies from Hudspeth county.

"Sierra Blanca!" gasped the deputy. "All hell's busted loose. This mornin' that feller Slade Walters who owns the Runnin' W rode into town to see his lawyer, he said. Things started boilin' pronto. A mob of Mexicans gathered in the plaza, yellin' that he was the man who was goin' to close the salt lakes. They acted as if they was expectin' him."

"What happened, damn it!" bawled Sheriff Rader as the deputy paused for breath.

"Potter got hold of Walters and run him across the plaza and shoved him in the jail," said the deputy. "He locked the door and him and Deputy Raines are holdin' the mob off with rifles. But they've sent to Iser for dynamite and figger to blow the jail to smithereens. They couldn't find any in town. Potter locked up all there was the other day. I slipped away and rode here for help."

SHERIFF RADER instantly swung into action. "Round up your boys, Henry," he ordered. "Where's Hank Blivens and Courtney? Find 'em, somebody. Where you goin', Hatfield?"

"I'm riding ahead," the Lone Wolf flung over his shoulder. "There's no time to waste and your horses can't keep up with Goldy. Come on as fast as you can."

"You'll just get yourself killed, goin' it in there alone!" roared the sheriff.

"There's a hundred men in that mob!" the deputy from Hudspeth yelled added warning.

"I'll risk it," Hatfield shouted back and raced for the stable where Goldy was stalled. In scant seconds he had the rig on the great sorrel. Followed by staring eyes and excited shouts, he thundered out of town.

"Thirty miles of hard going, and a good deal of it uphill," he told the golden horse. "Sift sand, feller, we've got to make it before they get back from Iser with that dynamite. They've got more miles to cover, but we don't know how much of a start they have on us."

Skirting the foothills of Beach Mountain, the great sorrel raced on, snorting with excitement, slugging his head above the bit, his glorious black mane tossing in the wind, his irons clashing the stones, mile after mile without slackening speed.

Then up a gradual grade past Three Mile Mountain and Hackett Peak. Half way out, Hatfield pulled up to allow him to drink sparingly from a little stream and catch his breath. Then more fleeting miles over the crumbling backbone of the Carrizo Range and on and on.

Anxiously Hatfield gazed ahead, his ears straining for the boom of the dynamite explosion that would carry a long way through the clear air. But he heard nothing save the steady beat of Goldy's irons and the rush of the wind of their passing.

"We're doin' it, feller," he muttered. "Just a couple more miles to go."

They topped a rise and Sierra Blanca lay before them in the distance, the sun-baked plains in the vicinity of the old town cooled by mountain breezes. Soon the Ranger's keen gaze could make out the details of the settlement. As he drew nearer, he could see that the plaza was crowded with a dense throng of men gathered in front of the stores across from the squat little jail building with its barred windows and thick adobe walls. All eyes were turned toward the lone horseman as he thundered into the plaza and jerked his panting horse to a slithering halt.

Steel gleamed and flickered.

Jim Hatfield swung down from the saddle and faced the suddenly silent mob. His hands were empty, but on his broad breast gleamed the silver star of the Rangers and his eyes were coldly gray as the granite of the mountain crests. His voice rang out, stern, compelling, pregnant with authority:

"In the name of the State of Texas! Disperse and go about your business in an orderly manner. This is an unlawful gathering."

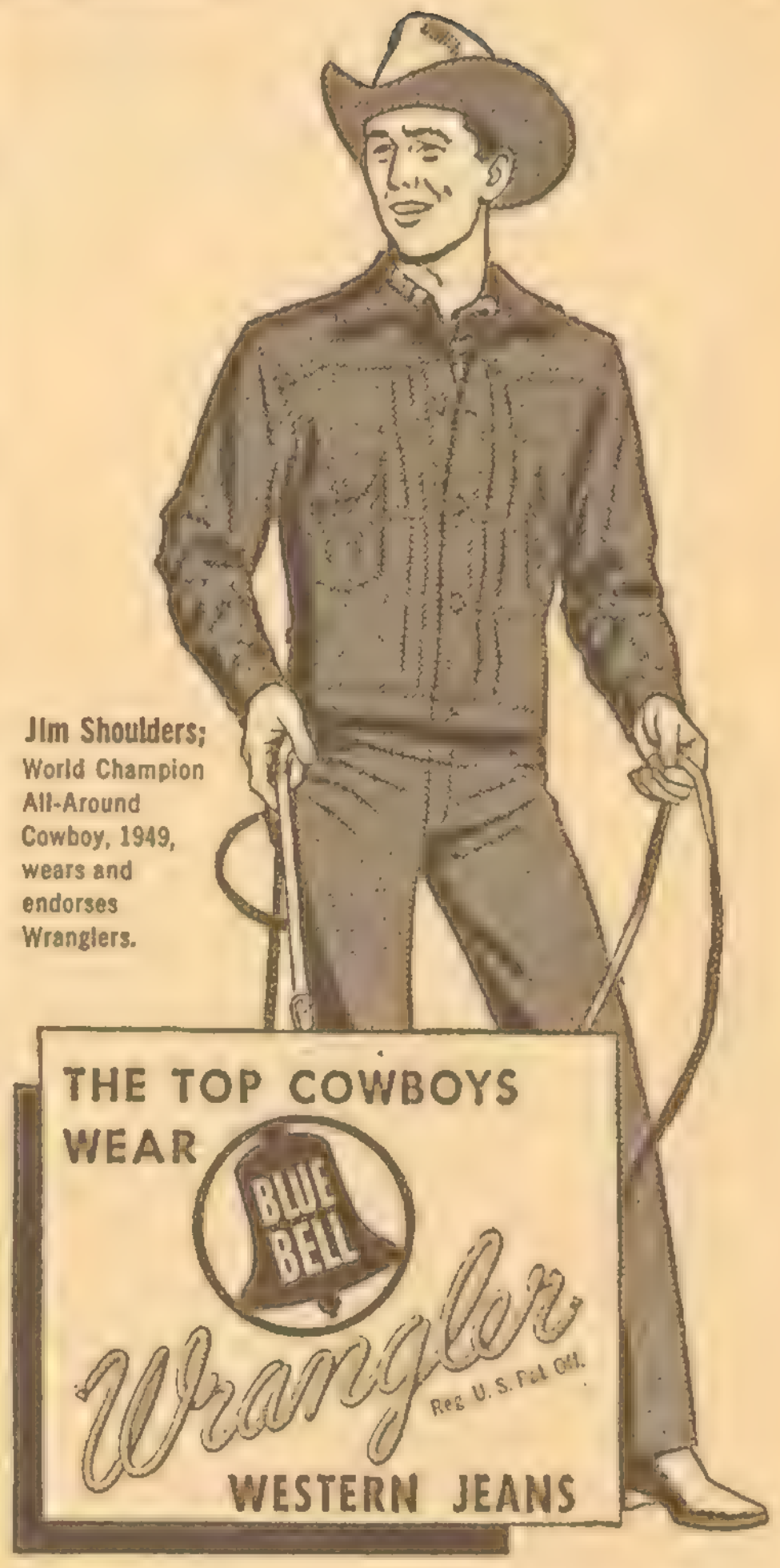
A murmur that loudened to a mutter ran through the jostling throng:

"A Ranger! He's a Ranger!"

Then a shout arose somewhere in the mob:

"He is but one! *Amigos,* do we fear one man? Shoot him!"

[*Turn page*]



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Hatfield's hands flashed down and up. Two black gun muzzles yawned toward the mob. His voice rolled forth again.

"Go ahead and shoot," he said contemptuously. "You can get me—there's sure enough of you. But don't forget, I'll get five or six of you hombres in the front ranks before I go down. Who hankers to be first?"

HE TOOK a stride forward. The men in the front ranks evinced a decided inclination to ease back a mite. More shouts arose. Those behind were urging those in front to do something. Those in front did not appear overly anxious to do it. They were no cowards, those dark-faced fighting men in whose veins ran the blood of the Conquistadores and the fierce mountain Yaquis, but just the same the proposition that had been made them was not exactly to their liking. *He* was ready to die. He had made that plain. But were they?

Each man fronting those rock-steady gun muzzles had an uneasy premonition that he would be the first to feel the hot lead tearing through his body. It was not a pleasant prospect. They hesitated. Perhaps a little temporizing would not be out of order. A voice from the front ranks called out—

"The hombre Walters—he plans to rob us of our salt, to close the lakes, to take from the mouths of our children the bread we earn."

"That's not so," Hatfield instantly countered. "The *Senor* Walters has no intention of interfering with the salt traffic. He but plans to mine the minerals that underlie the flats. He will provide much work, at good wages, for many here in Sierra Blanca."

A murmur arose, grew to a cloud of mutter, with peaks of wrangling. Hatfield relaxed, his lips twitching slightly in a smile. There was nothing more to fear from the mob. He holstered his guns and began rolling a cigarette.

"*Senor* Ranger," called a voice, "how are we to know this is true. What pledge is given us?"

Hatfield finished and lighted his cigarette. Then he said simply:

"My word."

There was a moment of silence. Then a big man who was evidently the leader of the mob stepped forward.

"*Senor* Ranger," he said courteously, "it is sufficient."

"Okay," Hatfield replied. "Now we've had enough foolishness, so let's get down to business. Drag out a table and chairs and get pens and paper. We're going to put all this in writing." He turned and leisurely crossed the plaza to the jail.

"Come on out, Walters," he called. "The boys want to have a pow-wow with you."

CHAPTER XI

A Friend Explains

BOLTS and bars rattled. The door swung open and Sheriff Potter and his deputy stepped out, still alert and watchful. Between them was Slade Walters who hurried forward with outstretched hand.

"Feller," he said, "if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I never would have believed it."

"Walters," Hatfield asked as they shook hands, "who knew you were coming to Sierra Blanca this morning?"

"Why," replied Walters, "I told Howard Burton I was comin'. He promised to meet me here this evenin'."

"Thought so," Hatfield said with a nod. "Let's go."

He led the way to the table that had been hurriedly procured from a nearby *cantina*. The men who a few minutes before had been thirsting for his blood grinned sheepishly at Walters. The big leader bowed courteously and waited for Walters to sit down before occupying his own chair. The aproned *cantina* owner hustled out with bottles and glasses and placed them on the table alongside the pens and paper.

"*Senor*," said the big leader as he filled the glasses, "my name is Miguel Vegara. I drink to your health." They shook hands after downing their drinks and soon pens were scratching and the two were animatedly discussing the agreement as to salt and the details of prospective labor.

"Men come from the east," a voice suddenly called.

Hatfield gazed at the speeding horsemen. "Just Sheriff Rader and some of the boys dropping in for a visit," he said casually.

There was silence. Then somebody chuckled. Somebody else grinned out loud. The humor of the situation struck the crowd and a roar of laughter shook the *cantina* awnings.

A few minutes later, Sheriff Rader and his posse pulled their foaming horses to a halt and stared in blank amazement at the hilarious scene.

"Light off and down a drink," Hatfield called. "We're having a little celebration."

The posse dismounted, too astonished for words. Dazedly they accepted the glasses that were thrust into their hands.

Soon the agreements were finished and signed. There was hand shaking all around. Slade Walters regaled the posse with an animated account of what happened in the plaza.

"Just what would be expected of the Lone Wolf," chuckled Sheriff Rader. Tarp Henry clapped Hatfield on the shoulder with a huge hand.

"Son, you sure did yourself proud," he said admiringly. "And you're a Ranger! Well! Well!"

Hatfield nodded absently. He was gazing along the trail that wound northward out of town. In fact, his eyes had seldom left it during the past hour. He alone saw the three horsemen round the bend a mile or so distant.

"Inside, everybody," he ordered. "Rader, you and your bunch go over to Potter's office and stay there. I want this plaza to myself for a little while. I'm expecting some visitors."

The bewildered crowd obeyed, jostling into the stores and *cantinas*, peering furtively out windows. Sheriff Rader and the others also obeyed Hatfield's repeated order, albeit reluctantly. Hatfield took up a post under one of the awnings, where he could see but not be seen by the approaching horsemen. A little later the three riders entered the plaza. One was Howard Burton. The others were squat, hard-eyed men whose broad faces and dark coloring hinted at more than a little Apache blood.

The trio seemed astonished at the deserted state of the plaza. After a moment of muttered conversation they dismounted and headed for one of the *cantinas*.

JIM HATFIELD stepped into view. His voice rang out:

"Howard Burton, also known as Simon Boraccho, I arrest you for robbery and murder. Anything you say—"

With a scream of rage and terror, Hunter went for his guns. He was lightning fast, but he died gripping them still holstered, Hatfield's two bullets laced through his heart. His companions shot their hands into the air and howled for mercy.

"Lock them up," Hatfield told Sheriff Potter as the posse boiled out of the office. "If there's any more of the bunch mavericking around, I've a notion you and Rader can persuade that pair to tell you where you can find them."

Sheriff Potter hurried forward and secured the prisoners.

"Say," exclaimed Rader, "here comes another feller, foggin' it for fair."

His eyes somber, Hatfield gazed at the tall bay horse speeding down the trail. A moment later Tarp Henry gave an astonished yelp.

"Why, it's a gal!" he exploded.

"Yes," Hatfield said, "too late."

The bay horse crashed to a halt in the center of the plaza. His rider, a girl with great blue eyes and curly red-brown hair glanced wildly about. She gave an anguished cry and in another instant she was kneeling beside the stark form of

Howard Burton, sobbing convulsively.

Jim Hatfield walked over to her and touched her bowed shoulder.

"Ma'am," he said as she looked up through her tears, "just what was this man to you?"

"My—my brother," she sobbed.

Hatfield's eyes were all compassion. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he said, "plumb sorry, but it couldn't be helped."

The girl stood up. Tears still glittered on her lashes, but her face was strangely composed.

"Yes," she said, her voice flat and toneless, "it couldn't be helped. It had to end this way. I do not blame you, *Senor* Ranger."

Hatfield took her gently by the arm and led her across the plaza to the sheriff's office. He placed her in a chair.

"Have you anything to tell us, ma'am?" he asked.

The girl gazed around at the friendly, sympathetic faces.

"As I told you," she said, "he was my brother. He was always wild and he caused our mother endless trouble and worry. I seemed to be the only thing he ever really cared for. I could influence him as nobody else could. My mother knew this and when she was dying she made me promise to never leave him. I kept the promise as best I could. There was one way I could influence him. I prevented him from committing many crimes by insisting that I be with him. Through fear for me he would desist. Then one night he vanished. All that I could learn was that he had left *Mejico* and come north. From time to time I would hear of him, but I searched three years before I found him—here. I heard the name Simon Borracho spoken of, and knew it must be he. That was his real name, you know. I am Teresa Borracho."

"You are Mexican, then?" said Hatfield.

"Yes," the girl replied. "I was born in Chihuahua City. So at last I found him, but I seemed to have lost much of my influence over him. I think that toward the last he was utterly mad."

"I think so, too," Hatfield interpolated. "His eyes showed it."

THE girl gave him a grateful glance. "He feared you, *Senor* Ranger, feared and hated you from the time he saw you sitting your great golden horse in the shadows of the pass. He tried to kill you or have you killed."

"And you saved me a couple of times," Hatfield observed.

"I did what I could," the girl said sadly. "But I could not save him."

A silence followed, broken at length by Hatfield.

"And what do you figure to do now, ma'am?" he asked.

"I do not know," the girl replied listlessly. "I have no friends, no one who is dear to me—now. I suppose I shall go away somewhere, and try to forget."

Slade Walters had never taken his eyes off the girl from the time she sat down in the chair. Now he spoke, hesitantly, flushing to the roots of his blond hair.

"Ma'am," he said, "my old mother is all by herself at my ranchhouse, and I've a notion she gets mighty lonesome at times, when I'm away. It would be good for her to have somebody to talk to, and to sort of look after her. She's a mighty old lady but a mighty nice one. I've a notion she'd be plumb glad to see you. How about me takin' you up there to stay with her? You'd have a home then."

The girl's blue eyes met his. She colored faintly under his regard.

"It—it would be most wonderful," she said.

"Then that's settled," Walters exclaimed briskly. "Come on and I'll take you over to the hotel and get you a room where you can lie down while I take care of what has to be taken care of."

They left the office together, Walters hovering protectively over her. Hatfield followed their progress with dancing eyes.

"I've a notion," he chuckled to Sheriff Rader, "that Walters is just about finished with hating Mexicans.

"And I reckon my chore here is just about finished, too," he added. "I want

to have a word with those jiggers behind the bars."

He strode to the cells and addressed the two thoroughly cowed prisoners, in Spanish. They talked readily enough.

"Just as I thought," he said when he returned to the waiting group. "Burton learned from Walters when he was coming to Sierra Blanca to see his lawyer here. Then he got busy and spread the word around that Walters was the man who was going to stop the salt traffic. He decided to make one last try to get control before Walters changed the agreement between them and wrote in a provision that the salt traffic would not be interfered with. Dressed up in velvet and silver and posing as Simon Borracho, the liberator and champion of the oppressed, he packed plenty of influence in the River villages and could always find folks who believed in him and would pass along anything he said. He made them believe if they got rid of Walters, their danger of losing the salt lakes would be over."

"And when he got control, he would have demanded government protection for his holdin's," growled Tarp Henry.

"Exactly," Hatfield agreed. "And controlling the political situation in this section, he would likely have gotten it. He was playing for big stakes. Hundreds of folks make a living from the salt traffic. For one man it would mean a fortune. Well, I reckon that's about all and I'll be riding. Hope to see you all again some day, but Captain Bill will have another little chore lined up for me by the time I get back to the post, so I'll just say, *hasta luego*—till we meet again—and trail my twine."

They watched him ride away, tall and graceful atop his great golden horse, pleased anticipation in his steady eyes, to where duty called and danger and new adventure waited.

Jim Hatfield gets a taste of slave labor at first hand when he is captured by a Nueces River country gang of sidewinders who sacrifice their honor to the gods of greed in—

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LONG SAM corrects a mistake

An Outlaw Littlejohn Story

By LEE BOND

The gun whipped up

Slickered killers

find the lanky avenger

too slick to handle!

ALTHOUGH he was almost half a mile away, Long Sam Littlejohn saw the stage guard commit suicide. It amounted to that in Long Sam's opinion, at least. The guard was sitting beside the stage driver, hands up, a double-barreled shotgun lying across his knees. Three mounted men, wearing black masks and long black slickers, had jumped their horses out into the road, brandishing six-shooters.

The driver got his teams halted and

put his own hands up. And without any sense that Long Sam could see in the move, the stocky guard's hands suddenly whipped down for the shotgun across his lap. Smoke mushroomed from a pistol in the hand of one of the masked men. Long Sam saw the smoke, and saw the guard lean and fall out into the sandy roadway.

"Three men with the cold drop, and that guard tried to beat them to the smoke, Sleeper!" Long Sam told his tough old roan.

Outlawed, with a sizable cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam knew that he had to get off that ridge top before the stage driver spotted him and decided that he was part of the bandit crew, acting as lookout. Dressed in jetty black from boots to flat-crowned hat, he reckoned that he would loom up plenty against the bright Texas sky. He lifted Sleeper's reins, intending to start down the slope towards the towering thickets.

"Judas Priest!" he yelled suddenly, staring.

One of the masked men had leaned from the saddle, seized the shiny coach handle and flung the door open. To Long Sam's astonishment a woman sprang out and upward from the open door, locked her arms around the bandit's neck, and literally tore him from his saddle.

They landed in the sandy road, but the woman was up and dashing into the thickets even as Long Sam threw spurs to his mount and started down the low hill. He saw the unhorsed bandit leap up and go after the woman. One of the two masked men still ahorse took after the fleeing mount of the fellow who had been set afoot, while the third bandit kept a gun aimed at the stage driver.

THE moment he was off the slope Long Sam slowed to a walk, listening intently as he quartered through the thickets. He had worked well towards the stage road and was beginning to think he had missed a chance to help the woman when he saw her reel into an opening ahead of him. A saucy little hat she had been wearing when she leaped from the stagecoach was gone, her dove-gray silk dress was snagged in many places from her flight through the thorny jungles. She had dark auburn hair and gray green eyes that filled with terror at sight of Long Sam.

"I aim to help you, girl!" Long Sam called. "Wait!"

He thought she checked her speed. But he was not certain. Brush crashed behind him, and a man's harsh swearing caused him to glance over his shoulder. He saw the tallish, masked man who had set out after the girl lurch into the natural opening. He saw the gun in the man's hand whip up, and was ducking instinctively when the pistol belched flame. Long Sam seemed to be floating away ahead of a savage blow that had fallen against his neck. He rolled out of the saddle and hit the sandy earth, but did not know when he hit.

The searing heat of a high sun prodded at Long Sam Littlejohn like raw flame, making him turn and twist against the sandy earth. Then pain came with his sluggish movements—a bitter pain that began somewhere along the right side of his neck and pounded up into his brain. He shoved at the ground with trembling hands and sat up, staring hastily about.

"Sleeper is gone!" the gaunt outlaw croaked.

He lifted his right hand and felt of his throbbing neck, wincing when he found a double puncture made by a bullet that had gone in, tunneled through the flesh barely short of striking bone, then come out again. He lifted and tightened a black silk neckerchief about the wound, then started to move around, reading sign. He picked up his black hat and pulled it on over a tousled mop of yellow hair, smoky eyes sharpening as he noted that Sleeper had done considerable plunging and stamping. Then Long Sam saw something that stopped him in his tracks.

"Blood?" he made a question of the word, squatting on spurred heels even as he spoke.

There was a dark stain on the ground, near the mouth of the little opening into

which the auburn-haired girl had been scooting the last Long Sam saw of her. The outlaw reached out, scuffed back the surface of the stained spot, then took a pinch of the sand between his thumb and forefinger.

"Blood, all right!" he muttered. "And quite a bit of it was spilled here, too. There's the girl's footprints, along with a man's bootprints. That masked hellion who put a pistol ball through my neck must have shot the girl, too."

Long Sam suddenly stood erect, whirling. He stared at a wall of tornillo, scalp prickling. Someone was groaning over there. He moved to the brush and peered into its shadows, hands on pistol grips. Lying sprawled there was the tall bandit who had shot him off his horse, still wearing the black mask and long, black slicker!

"All right, you!" Long Sam growled. "Waltz out of there."

The bandit groaned again, but did not move. Long Sam grunted, eased into the thorny brush, and stood glowering down at the senseless masked fellow.

"You're the tallest of the three bandits who halted the stage," he said. "And it was you I saw shoot that guard. Let's see your face, killer!"

Long Sam squatted down, started to reach for the unconscious bandit's shoulder. He stopped suddenly, for riders were crashing through the thickets, not far distant.

"Rick!" a man shouted. "Where are you, Rick?"

"That shot we heard was off yonder a piece, I think," another man said loudly. "Hang onto Rick's hoss and foller me, Bob."

"I'll be lucky if I hang onto this crazy hoss!" Bob panted. "And we better not waste much more time huntin' Rick and that girl. Old Gus Dudley laid leather to them stage teams when we told him to beat it. Posses will be swarmin' all over here before long."

"So your name's Rick, eh?" Long Sam muttered, eyeing the senseless bandit as the two riders moved out of hearing.

He seized the outlaw's shoulder, whirled him over, then jerked his hand up and stared at it. His fingers were smeared with blood, and a glance at the masked man's shoulder revealed that the slicker and shirt sleeve were both badly torn. Long Sam spread the material back, grinning when he saw torn flesh and huge teeth marks on the man's upper right arm.

"Sleeper's work!" Long Sam chuckled. "This Rick tried to catch Sleeper, and got into trouble."

Sleeper was ornery-tempered even with Long Sam and would kick, paw or bite any stranger who ventured within reach of him. Long Sam was satisfied that Sleeper had worked this Rick bandit over, guessing that the roan had probably kicked the man senseless after biting him.

"Now, Rick, let's see what you look like!" Long Sam grunted, and slid the black silk mask over the man's face.

RICK'S face was blunt-jawed and thick-lipped. Blue-black whiskers showed under the dark skin. There was a scar across the bridge of his long nose, and deep, hard lines in his face despite the fact that he was obviously not old in years.

"A tough rooster, you!" Long Sam growled. "After old Sleeper bit you, then kicked you stem-winding, that red-haired girl evidently managed to get aboard that old roan sinner and pull out of here."

Long Sam backed out into the winding lane, then began following Sleeper's spoor at a swinging walk. It was, he knew, all of five miles to the river town of Lost Ford. His wounded neck throbbed. Heat and thirst added to his miseries as he plodded steadily onward. He found a small strip of dove-gray silk cloth caught on a thorny branch, and knew that the auburn haired girl had indeed managed to mount Sleeper and head for town.

"If the girl had just waited until I got my wits back!" Long Sam croaked.

He went on, limping on feet that felt swollen and scalded in his boots. He judged that he had made half the punishing hike to Lost Ford when he heard a

sound coming out of the hot thickets that stopped him in his tracks.

"Somebody coming!" Long Sam muttered.

He scooted around behind a huge clump of prickly pear, standing where he could peer out through the heavy pads. Somewhere down the meandering lane a man was whistling tunelessly. The sound grew steadily louder, and presently Long Sam could hear the muffled sound of hooves advancing over the sandy soil. Then a rider came around a turn in the natural lane and Long Sam almost yelped in astonishment.

"Sleeper!" he croaked, staring.

Long Sam's tough old roan was being led by a tall, gray rider who whistled tunelessly as he sat slouched in the saddle on a tall bay. The gray man was watching the ground ahead of his horse, backtracking Sleeper, Long Sam knew. And the rider was sheriff Bill Gavner, from Lost Ford!

"I sure don't know Gavner well enough to risk stepping out and asking for my horse!" the gaunt outlaw said tensely.

The old officer halted suddenly, just even with the big pear clump. He quit whistling and sat there, not even turning his head. Long Sam smothered a groan, knowing the sheriff had seen his tell-tale boot prints.

"If you've got a bead on me, Sam, don't shoot!" the sheriff said, still facing forward.

"You huntin' me, sheriff?" Long Sam asked uneasily.

"I just came out to pick up your body." The sheriff glanced at the pear clump, grinning faintly.

"My body?" Long Sam echoed.

"Nola Veach said I'd find you out here with a bullet-broke neck!" the sheriff declared.

"Nola Veach would be a very pretty young lady with auburn hair and greenish eyes?" Long Sam guessed.

"That's right," the sheriff agreed. "Nola claims that she got into considerable trouble out here this morning, and thinks you got your neck broke by a bullet when you tried to help her."

"I tried to help the girl, and did get shot through the neck, though the wound isn't serious," Long Sam answered.

He stepped out from behind the pear clump as he finished speaking. He saw shrewd dark eyes stab at him from the sheriff's seamed face, yet the old officer made no pass towards the pistol holstered at his right thigh.

Speaking rapidly, Long Sam explained how he had seen the three masked men stop the stage, watched one of them shoot the guard off the coach, and how one of the masked men, unhorsed by the girl's nervy action, had chased her into the thickets. Long Sam felt downright guilty over not having mentioned the fact that he had learned that two of the bandits were named Rick and Bob, and that he had found Rick unconscious and unmasked him. But something in the way the sheriff's eyes hardened made Long Sam wonder if his word carried much weight with the grizzled old lawman.

"That's the same story Nola told, only she was madder than scat over having been roughed around," the sheriff growled when Long Sam broke off. "You seen Moss Catlin shot down in cold blood, eh?"

"If Moss Catlin was the stage guard's name, I saw him murdered," Long Sam nodded gravely.

"The shotgun guard was Moss Catlin," the sheriff declared, and tossed Long Sam the rope he had been leading Sleeper with.

LONG SAM took the loop off his roan's neck, coiled the saddle rope and handed it back to the sheriff, then mounted. The outlaw felt downright nervous, for the sheriff's dark eyes were watching his constantly.

"There was something odd about that holdup, sheriff," Long Sam offered.

"Meaning what?" the lawman wanted to know.

"The bandits paid no mind to a strong box I could see under the feet of the guard and driver," the outlaw explained. "I've got a hunch those fellows wanted that girl, not whatever money or other valu-

ables the stage might have had aboard."

"Very likely you're right," the sheriff nodded. "Nola thinks the bandits aimed to kidnap her, anyway."

"Ransom?" Long Sam put the one-word question sharply.

"I don't think ransom was what them hellions had in mind!" the sheriff snorted. "But before we go into that, let me say that I don't aim to arrest you, Sam. Now will you quit squirming and watchin' for me to make a hostile move?"

"Sorry, sheriff!" Long Sam grinned ruefully.

"Friends of mine who happen to be Texas Rangers say you never done nothin' outside the law except fight the scum carpet-baggers stuck in as state police, right after the war," the old sheriff grunted. "If the Rangers don't want you, neither do I. But I know a deputy United States Marshal who is sure faunchin' to lay you by the heels."

"The deputy you mentioned would be Joe Fry, who works out of Austin," Long Sam growled. "If that derby-wearin', cigar eatin' little runt would quit hollering my name every time a crime is committed in Texas, I'd soon be able to settle down and live respectable."

"Fry has a rep for being an ace man hunter, but in my book he's a carnsarned pest!" the sheriff grunted. "I've had him in my hair for almost two weeks, Littlejohn."

"Joe Fry is at Lost Ford?"

"He's been there for twelve days," the sheriff replied. "He's hunting you, claiming you're holed up around here somewhere."

"With Joe Fry around, I guess I'd better head for Mexico, at that," Long Sam said. "That girl, Nola Veach, is all right?"

"Thanks to your roan, yes," the sheriff nodded.

"Thanks to Sleeper?" Long Sam lifted yellow brows as he asked the question.

"Nola says that cuss who shot you out of the saddle got the drop on her, and told her he aimed to put her on your hoss and take her back to the stage road where his two pardners were," the sheriff explained. "But Nola says the minute the bandit reached for the reins, your horse grabbed a mouthful of him, flung him clean off his feet, then kicked him tumbling into a thicket when the feller tried to get up."

"The old scamp is meaner than sin, and that's a fact!" Long Sam admitted. "It's a wonder he didn't hurt the girl when she tried to get on him."

"Nola said after watching that old devil work the bandit over, she knowed better than to take chances," the sheriff snorted. "You light a shuck for Mexico before anybody sees you, Sam!"

"Yeah, sure!" the gaunt outlaw agreed. "Joe Fry has no doubt nailed up a lot of big 'Wanted' posters with my picture and a list of crimes I'm supposed to have committed played up prominent."

"Fry has plastered the country with posters!" the sheriff gritted. "But nobody paid much attention to that, or to Fry's tall tales about you bein' a cold-blooded killer and thief, until the bank was robbed, and three of the four bandits were heard calling their tall leader 'Sam' when they spoke to him!"

"What's that?" Long Sam cried.

"At noon, five days ago, the Lost Ford Bank was robbed," the sheriff answered. "The only teller on duty was shot dead for trying to lock the vault. Ed Veach, the bank owner, was shot and wounded so bad he's still unconscious most of the time. Men who got to the street in time to see the four masked bandits pulling out, heard the tall leader called 'Sam' by the other three."

"And Joe Fry has been shooting off his mouth around here about me being a bandit and killer!" Long Sam rasped. "That gave some of your local bad boys a bright idea, sheriff. Four of 'em robbed your bank, called their tallest man 'Sam' where people could hear, and figured I'd be charged with the crime."

"Maybe," the sheriff shrugged. "But Joe Fry says the descriptions given of the bandit called 'Sam' fit you too well for it to have been anybody else *but* you!"

"Of course Fry would blame me!" Long Sam grunted. "But is this banker you

mentioned, Ed Veach, any kin to the girl those three masked hellions tried to kidnap out here this morning?"

"Ed is Nola's father," the sheriff nodded. "Nola works at her daddy's bank, and was there when it was robbed. The story got spread around, Sam, that Nola can identify one of those bank bandits."

LONG SAM groaned. "Those masked hellions who tried to get hold of that girl were no doubt three of your bandits, sheriff. But if Nola Veach can identify one of the bank robbers, why hasn't she done it before this?"

"Ed Veach was rushed straight to Austin the day he was shot," the officer replied. "Nola and her Ma went with Ed and stayed right with him day and night. I went down to Austin and asked Nola if she thought she recognized one of the bandits. She seemed plumb flabbergasted that such a story was out, and swore she had no idea who any of the four bandits might be."

"You didn't tell anybody about your trip to Austin and your talk with Nola Veech?" Long Sam asked sharply.

"I kept mum even to my deputies!" the sheriff admitted glumly. "To be honest about it, Littlejohn, I feel pretty sure those bandits are local men. I thought letting them worry about Nola bein' able to name one of them might make them try to quit the country or do somethin' else that would tip their hands."

"Who started the story that Nola Veach knew one of the bandits?" Long Sam wanted to know.

"Lafe Neely, a town drunk and moocher," the sheriff grunted. "Lafe claims he was the first man into the bank, after the holdup. He says Nola was crouchin' beside her wounded father, and claims he heard Nola say 'Dad, I recognized one of those bandits.' "

"And Nola says she did not recognize one of the bandits?" Long Sam asked, frowning.

"That's right," the sheriff shrugged. "And she's tellin' the truth, of course. Lafe Neely is one of the brazenest liars a man ever listened to. But maybe his cussed lyin' will come in handy, this time. With Nola home to help go over the bank's books, them bandits may get so jumpy they'll do something that will let me get a line on the murdering hellions."

"They'll do something, all right!" Long Sam growled. "They'll murder Nola Veach, thanks to your stunt of letting them go on thinking the girl can identify one of them."

"For gosh sakes!" the old officer yelped. "I told a Ranger captain friend of mine, down at Austin, how I was working this, and he seen that Nola was guarded there at the hospital, all the time. But her Ma stayed in Austin, so she's home alone. I'll have to see that she has protection here, for I ast her not to tell a soul that she didn't recognize one of those bandits."

"You'll get that girl killed!" Long Sam flared. "Come on, and let's get to town and see that she has protection, man."

"You raise a dust for Mexico!" the sheriff yelped angrily. "You show your face around Lost Ford and public sentiment will force me to clap you in jail. Git, and leave me run my office!"

Long Sam wanted to tell the sheriff about Bob and that Rick fellow, but got no chance. Sheriff Gavner socked spurs to his mount and loped away, muttering angrily.

"That proddy old coot wasn't kidding about jailing me!" Long Sam decided aloud. "Hustle, Sleeper! Maybe we can put that girl on her guard, then scoot across the Rio before Gavner makes it back to town."

But several things got in the way of Long Sam's plans for a brief stop in Lost Ford, and a quick trip across the Rio to Mexico. To begin with, he found the town literally swarming with shouting, highly excited men. The stage had come in, the driver had told his story, and Long Sam arrived just as a posse that included every able-bodied man in town was preparing to leave.

Long Sam bushed up near the edge of town, watching deputy United States Marshal Joe Fry stand on the steps at

the rusty court house and shout orders at the milling possemen. Fry wore a tailored brown suit, brown derby and shiny button shoes, and looked red-faced and angry as he bawled orders. When the huge cavalcade finally streamed out of town, Joe Fry was in the lead, coattails flying, blocky figure square and solid in the saddle.

Long Sam stepped into Sleeper's saddle and rode out into the dust pall the posse left hanging over the street.

He spotted three gnarled oldsters standing on a street corner watching the posse depart, and rode towards them.

"Could you gents tell me the way to Ed Veach's house?" Long Sam asked. "I had a talk with Bill Gavner, but the way he told me to go would land me down at the river, I judge."

"Ride straight out the street and along the road to the first fork, then turn right," one of the old fellows directed. "The right fork ends at Ed's place, so you can't miss it, son. It ain't more than a mile out there, only you can't see the house from here for the cussed thickets."

Long Sam said sulphuric things as he spun Sleeper and jabbed the roan with dull rowels. So Ed Veach's home was a mile out of town, walled in by impenetrable thickets. And Nola had gone out there alone!

What better setup could those three masked devils who had tried to kidnap her off the stage ask?

Long Sam swung right when the road forked, not even checking pace. But when he glimpsed the top of a huge house above the thickets a few moments later, he hauled back at the reins. He did not know Nola Veach, and to come roaring into her yard might frighten her. On top of that, someone around Lost Ford might have realized the danger the girl was in and insisted on a guard being put around her home.

"And a guard would bounce a bullet off me if he seen me," Long Sam growled. "We'd better scoot into the brush and do a little scouting before we show ourselves, Sleeper."

HE SWUNG off the road and into a winding opening that led him out into the thorny jungles. He twisted and turned and eventually worked his way in on the west side of the Veach place, halting behind screening brush when he heard horses whinnying and moving around.

"Horses sound like they're in a corral," he commented aloud. "But what's got them milling?"

He swung out of Sleeper's saddle, moving away through the towering brush on foot. He came presently to the edge of a ten-acre clearing, lips pursed in a soundless whistle as he saw a huge barn circled by a tall corral made from peeled pine poles. Inside the corral a dozen or so sleek horses milled and pranced, ears cocked inquisitively towards a high board gate. The gate was on the far side of the corral from Long Sam.

"Something over there around that gate has them horses worried," he muttered.

Still tense, hands near pistol grips, he went around the corral at a crouching run, halting when he reached a point where he could peer along the front of the wall of peeled pine poles. The gaunt outlaw's breath sucked in, and he stood there for seconds, pressure building up inside him.

Crouching against the front side of the tall gate, Long Sam saw a stocky, round-faced man who held a shiny rifle in his hands. The man was watching the road that came in from the thickets.

"That guard spotted the dust I kicked up coming out this way!" the outlaw guessed.

Long Sam's voice ended on a muffled growl. Out of the towering wall of thickets where the road came into the clearing, two more men, each holding a rifle, had suddenly appeared. They walked towards the man at the gate, and Long Sam was staring at the taller of the two, seeing the tough face of him plainly. That man was Rick, the bandit he had unmasked far out in the thickets!

"It was nothing but loose stock kicking up that dust, Bob," Rick called as he and the slim, dark man with him approached

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the pudgy fellow at the gate.

Bob! The name was instantly familiar in Long Sam's ears. The two bandits who had been hunting Rick out where the stage had been stopped that morning, had shouted to each other, one of them calling the other 'Bob' a time or two!

Rick and the slim, beak-nosed man with him were at the gate now, frowning down at Bob, who was red-faced and talking angrily. Bob was arguing, trying to get Rick and the other to return to the thickets they had left.

"I tell you loose stock didn't kick up that dust!" Bob's voice lifted angrily. "That was a rider, and he turned off into the brush, out there. Rick, you and Ott both scoot back to where you was hiding. Matt will give up fits if we let somebody come snooping around here before he's through with that Veach filly."

"Stick out here in the heat if you want to, Bob!" the slim, mean-looking Ott fellow retorted. "Me and Rick are going back to the house and enjoy old Ed Veach's mellow whiskey and fine cigars."

"Better come along with us, Bob," Rick put in. "Only get hold of yourself, man. Matt has warned you twice to quit acting so blamed jumpy. Nola Veach ain't a fool. She's been watching you, and asked Matt what was making you so nervous. Relax, or you'll spill the beans."

"Relax!" Bob snapped. "You swear the feller you shot off a horse was Long Sam Littlejohn. Only Littlejohn wasn't around there when Ott and me finally heard you hollerin' and picked you up. What if that was Littlejohn raisin' that dust we seen down the road yonder?"

"I wish that long-shanked son would poke out here!" Rick declared harshly. "First, I'd shoot him for horning in when I had Nola Veach run down this morning. Then I'd shoot that splay-footed bone-pile he uses for a hoss. That bronc lamed my arm, and my belly still hurts where the critter kicked me."

Rick and Ott heeled around, walking away rapidly towards the house. Bob

cursed, stared off along the road for a moment, then followed them, trotting until he overtook them.

"So some gent named Matt is the boss of those three cutthroats, eh?" the outlaw gritted. "And Matt is holding Nola Veach prisoner, yonder in her own home."

NOLA VEACH was not a prisoner in the sense Long Sam had meant. She sat on a deep couch in a huge room that was shadowy and cool. The girl had on a pale green dress now, her naturally curly auburn hair was smoothly brushed, and she looked even lovelier, Long Sam thought, than she had when he saw her earlier in the day.

The gaunt outlaw had come into the back of the house and through a long hall, and was standing now in the shadows just off the vast living room. He wanted to keep looking at Nola, but turned his eyes resolutely to the man who sat facing her. The man was handsomely clad, big-shouldered, important looking. His hair was crisp and dark, his face angular, rugged, and thin-lipped.

"Matt, I've tried to be patient!" Nola Veach's voice lifted sharply through something the man had been saying.

Long Sam's attention flicked quickly to the girl, his glance barely touching Rick, Ott and pudgy Bob, who were busily helping themselves to bottles they had found in a cellarette at the far end of the room.

"Nola, you're a little spit-fire!" Matt told the girl. "I'm not trying to bully you, as you seem to think. You're in danger. I was in town when Gus Dudley arrived with the stage and told his tale. I got the boys and came out, when I could not find Sheriff Gavner. I want to protect you."

"Matt Barstoe, I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself!" Nola flared. "Just take your boys and go back to town."

Long Sam frowned uneasily. Nola Veach was angry, of that there was little doubt. But mostly, Long Sam realized suddenly, the girl was frightened of this Matt Barstoe and his three hirelings.

"You wouldn't be silly enough to stay out here alone, not after those bandits tried to kidnap you, Nola," Matt Barstoe said smoothly.

"And just what makes you think I'm without protection?" Nola countered.

Matt Barstoe laughed. Down the room, Rick Cullum, pudgy Bob Youngblood and Ott Tway all laughed, too. Long Sam saw Nola Veach turn pale, and thought she was on the point of cowering under Barstoe's amused and mocking stare.

"Let's not play childish games, my dear!" Barstoe chuckled.

"All right, Matt!" Nola said tensely. "Let's stop hedging and get down to cold facts. Why are you and your men here?"

"Why, to protect you from the bandits who tried to kidnap you!" Barstoe exclaimed.

"That, of course, is not the truth, Matt!" the girl spoke sharply. "By trying to question me about that bank robbery, you gave yourself away. What you actually want to know is whether or not I can identify one of the bandits, isn't it?"

"Of course I'm interested in knowing that, Nola!" Barstoe frowned. "I was a heavy depositor, therefore lost a lot to those bandits. But—"

Barstoe's voice ended on a startled oath. Nola Veach had suddenly leaped up and was dashing towards the very hallway where Long Sam stood watching. But Matt Barstoe was too quick for her. He seized one of the girl's slender arms, yanking her to a halt. Rick Cullum and the other two toughs closed in, scowling.

"All right, I proved a point, Matt!" Nola flung at the big man. "By stopping me you've shown clearly that your reasons for being here are not what you've claimed. Just what *do* you and these three hoodlums of yours want?"

"My! My!" Rick Cullum sneered. "Ain't she the uppity kind, though? Matt, she likely feels degraded, having a common saloon owner like you in her fine house!"

"Shut up!" Barstoe flung at Cullum.

Nola suddenly wrenched loose from Barstoe. She sprang to a heavy chair, darting around it when he tried to grab

her again. Barstoe's face turned ugly as he slid towards the girl.

"Take these thugs of yours and get out of here, Matt!" Nola ordered furiously.

"Maybe we better tuck our tails and run, boss!" Youngblood snickered.

"I'll bet all them fighting men she's got staked out close by have been just waiting for her to call them in to butcher us!" Ott Tway jeered.

"Shut your stupid mouths, and help me close in on this little fool!" Matt Barstoe roared. "We can't waste any more time trying to play it safe and easy."

"What—what are you talking about?" Nola cried out.

Neither of the four men answered. They started towards her, spreading out, intending to circle around the chair and flush her out into the open. The girl crouched, desperation in the way she glanced around the familiar room. Suddenly her moving eyes stopped, wild hope in them as she stared, astonished.

Long Sam Littlejohn had stepped out of the hallway. He walked into the vast, lovely room, feet soundless on thick carpet. He came in behind the four men who had suddenly halted, watching Nola Veach in a puzzled way. The girl's eyes were shining now. She smiled at Long Sam and tried to speak, but her voice was a choked whisper.

"What's the matter with you, Nola?" Matt Barstoe growled. "Blamed if you don't act like—"

Barstoe did not finish. Pudgy Bob Youngblood had glanced around, sensing that Nola was staring at some point behind him. "Littlejohn!" Youngblood almost screamed the name as he whirled, a six-shooter in his fist.

LONG SAM's bony hands flicked down, and from the level of his left hip flame and smoke and roaring sound gouted out into the room. Bob Youngblood twisted violently to the left, wailing in pain as he pawed at a bullet-smashed right wrist with his left hand. He fell, still howling, his cries going up into the vast roar of pistols firing at a rapid speed. Then Bob Youngblood's howls were silenced, for Ott Tway smashed down across him, knocked off his feet by a slug that had torn his face open.

But Long Sam Littlejohn was not doing all the damage. The gaunt outlaw was on his knees, breathless and dizzy from a bullet that had ripped across his right ribs. He peered into the thickening pall of acrid smoke, fearing to answer the gun flashes before him because he had lost sight of Nola Veach. He felt a bullet knock the hat off his head. Another scraped across the top of his left shoulder, burning like a hot iron. Behind the splitting pistol that was hurling the dangerous lead, he saw a gaunt figure that could not have been the girl, and fired right and left, hearing a man's hoarse cry as the figure toppled and melted down.

"Sam, he's over there, by the big chair!" Nola Veach's voice rang out.

She was beside him, crouched against the floor, putting out a slim hand to pluck at the bloody side of his shirt. The gaunt outlaw lunged to his feet, staggering when a bullet raked along the left side of his face. But Long Sam had seen the muzzle flash, and now his guns beat a deadly thunder into the room. He saw Matt Barstow lead up, spin in a dizzy circle, then trip and fall down through the gray pall of smoke. Long Sam rushed the man and stood over him, looking down into the white, twisted face. Matt Barstoe's left shoulder was smashed.

"Nola?" Long Sam called.

"Here!" she answered.

"Find ropes," the gaunt outlaw said. "We've got the four bandits who held up your daddy's bank and murdered a cashier. Rick Cullum, yonder, murdered that shotgun guard this morning. So he's noose bait, for sure."

The girl whirled and fled. Long Sam moved to a position where he could watch the four white-faced, suffering men who sprawled about the room.

"You blasted fool, you can't prove nothing on us!" Matt Barstoe panted.

"Having Rick Cullum, yonder, called 'Sam' while you four robbed the Lost

Ford Bank was a mistake, Barstoe!" Long Sam snapped. "I don't like being accused of crimes committed by other men. I figure on correcting that mistake you made by pushing *your* neck in a noose."

"Prove anything, you hellion!" Barstoe panted.

"You and your men didn't dare spend any of the bank loot, so it can all be recovered," Long Sam retorted. "And proving that you robbed the bank and killed that cashier won't be a bit hard, after that bank loot is found in your possession, fella. A court will—no you don't!"

Matt Barstoe had lunged to his feet, trying desperately to rush toward a tall window. Long Sam closed in, knocked him senseless with a swinging pistol barrel. Nola Veach came in then, panting from her swift movements as she handed Long Sam a coil of thin, strong rope. He pushed one of his guns into her slim hands. She accepted it and aimed it, in a very businesslike manner, at Rick Cullum.

"I almost wish you'd try to escape, Rick!" she told him angrily. "You gave me a bad scare this morning!"

"She knowed you, Rick!" Bob Youngblood gasped.

"After Sam Littlejohn's horse kicked him senseless, I lifted his mask and peeked at his face!" Nola retorted.

Rick Cullum moaned and slumped, almost passing out. Bob Youngblood and Ott Tway slumped wearily.

"If you took a look at Cullum's face, Nola, why didn't you tell the sheriff about it when you gave him my horse and sent him back to get me?" Long Sam asked.

"I didn't have the heart, Sam," the girl told him. "I meant to tell Sheriff Gavner when he got back to town. And I shall tell him. But I dread that, very much."

"What do you mean?"

"Rick Cullum is Sheriff Bill Gavner's son-in-law!" the girl told him gravely.

"Judas!" Long Sam exclaimed. "No wonder you put off telling a square-shooter like Gavner that Cullum is a thief and murderer. It'll be a bitter pill, but the old boy will have to swallow it. Watch these apes, Nola, while I start getting them ready for the last horseback ride they'll likely ever get."

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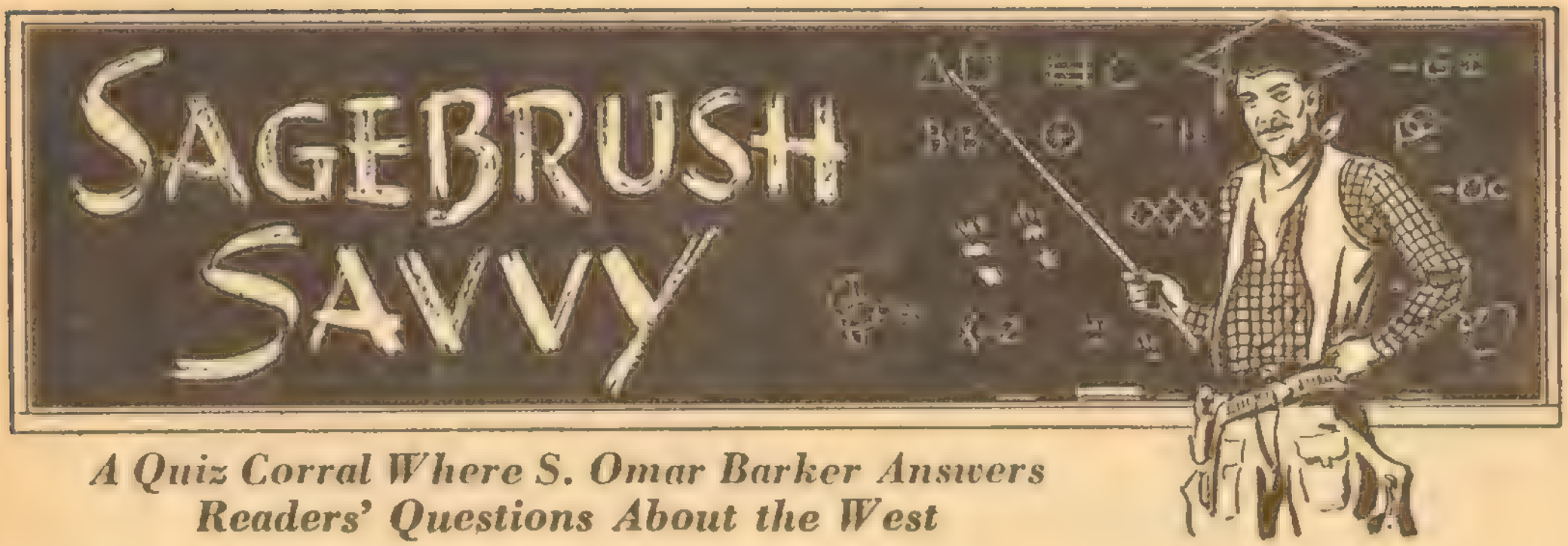

A Quiz Corral Where S. Omar Barker Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Just what does "hogtying" mean, and why is it so called?—R. V. N. (Conn.)

A.—"Hogtying" means tying one front and two hind legs or feet of an animal together so it can't get up. Early settlers in Texas often let their hogs run loose to fatten on acorns. Catching these half wild hogs for market, they tied them that way to haul them in wagons. That is probably why cowboys, using the same tie on cattle, called it "hogtying."

Q.—I heard a radio program in which Sheriff Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid cussed and threatened each other for several minutes before Garrett shot him. I'd always thought Garrett shot on that occasion without speaking. Which is historically correct?—J. W. D. (Colo.)

A.—You are. Sheriff Garrett was sitting on Pete Maxwell's bed, trying to find out the Kid's whereabouts from Pete, who was in bed, when the young outlaw came into the open door and said *"Quién es?"* ("Who is it?") The room was dark, but Garrett recognized the Kid's voice and shot him. Well aware of Billy's habit of shooting without warning, Garrett knew better than to identify himself by speaking. Most oldtimers agree he simply did his duty as an officer charged with the capture of Billy the Kid dead or alive. Garrett had no way of knowing that the Kid was, at the moment, unarmed.

Q.—My friends claim that the Mammoth Cave in Kentucky is the largest natural underground cavern in the world. I think the Carlsbad Caverns in southern New Mexico are larger. Who is correct?—T. J. M. (Tenn.)

A.—You are. Considered as one cave, the many connected rooms of the Carlsbad Caverns constitute the largest known cavern in the world.

Q.—What do cowboys mean when they call a horse a grullo, and how do you pronounce it? —D. G. (Ohio).

A.—*Grulla* (GROOL-yah or GROO-yah) is a Spanish word meaning "crane." A *grullo,* in the cow country, is a crane colored horse. The color may also be described as mousy gray with a bluish cast. In borrowing the word from Spanish, cowboys have made it do for both masculine and feminine: *grullo* for a horse, *grulla* for a mare.

Q.—I hear rodeo announcers call the big humpbacked steers and bulls that the cowboys try to ride "Braymas" or "Braymers." My dictionary says it is "Brahman," pronounced BRAH-man? How come?—E. L. (N. J.).

A.—Cowboys have always had a habit of making their own language. "BRAH-man" is doubtless the correct pronunciation, but the buckaroos that ride them will probably go right on calling them "BRAY-mers."

Q.—I have read that the Texas Rangers are the oldest corps of law officers in the West. Is this true?—R. B. W. (Mich.)

A.—Right. First organized in 1835, the Texas Rangers have been hard riding man-hunters for 116 years.

—*S. Omar Barker*

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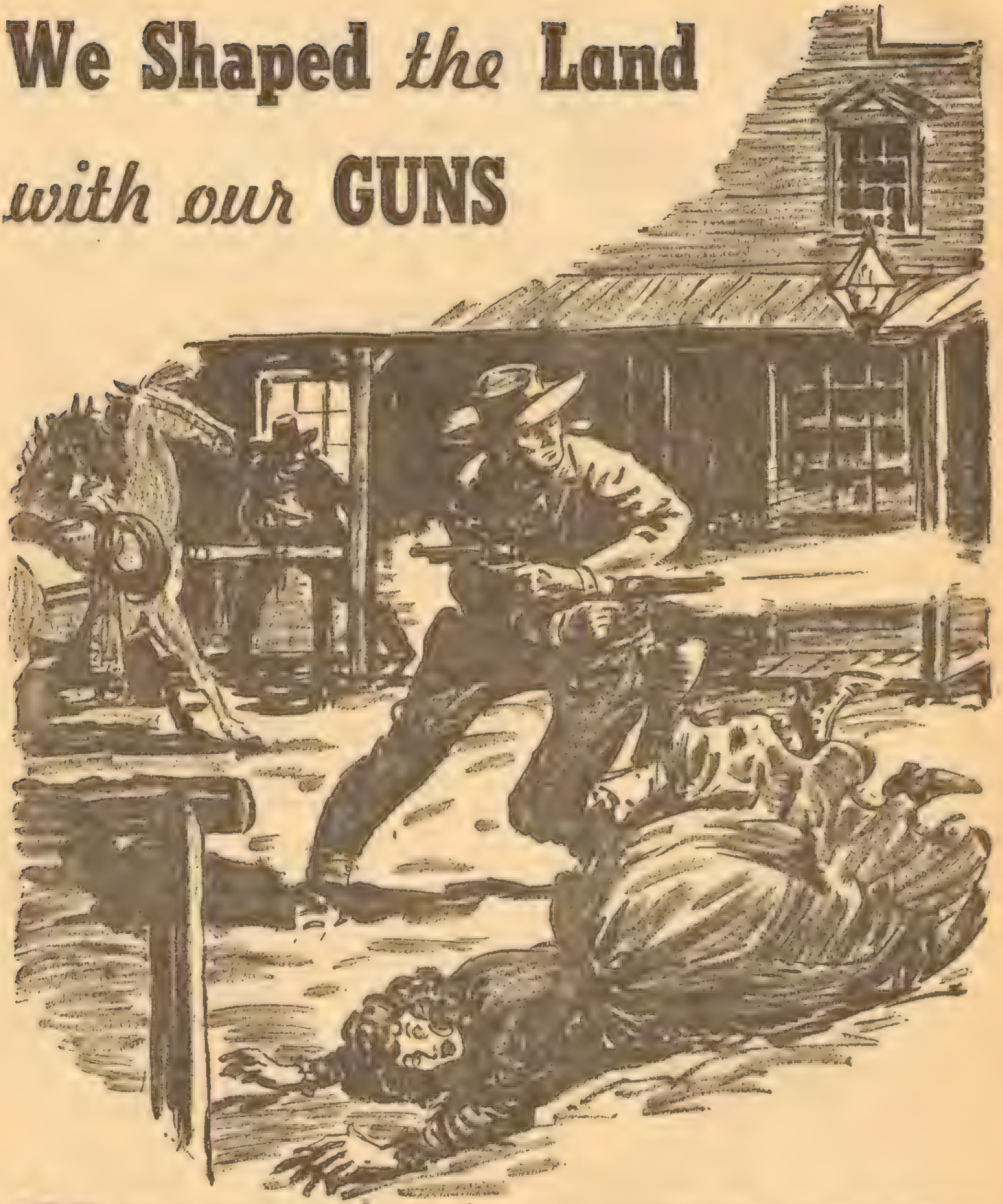
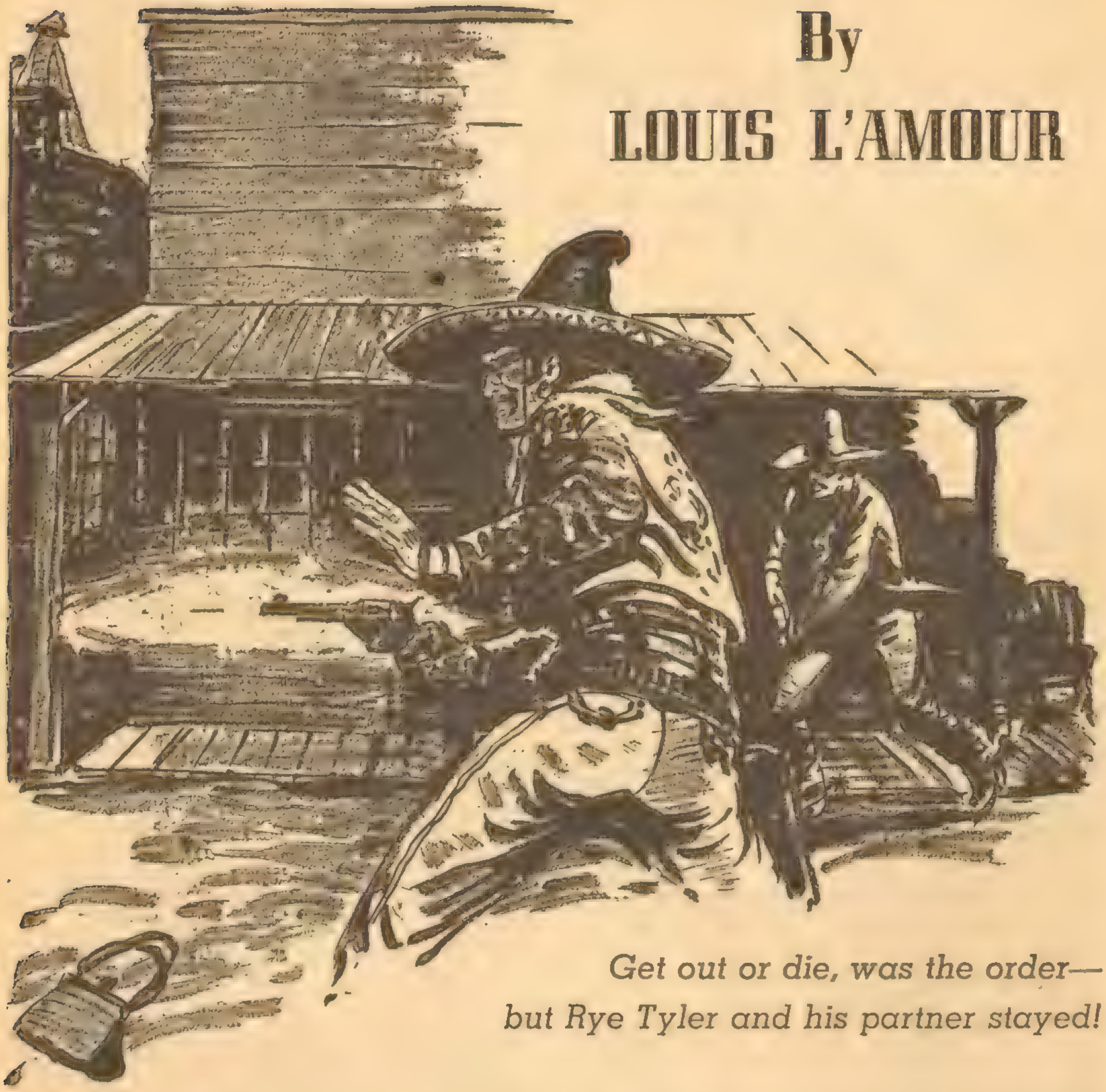


WE moved into the place on South Fork just before the snow went off. We had a hundred head of cattle gathered from the canyons along the Goodnight Trail, stray stuff from cattle outfits moving north. Most of these cattle had been back in the breaks for a couple of years and rounding them up was man-killing labor, but we slapped our iron on them and headed west.

Grass was showing green through the snow when we got there and the cattle made themselves right at home. Mountains to the east and north formed the base of a triangle of which the sides were shaped by creeks and the apex by

By LOUIS L'AMOUR



Get out or die, was the order—
but Rye Tyler and his partner stayed!

the junction of those creeks. It was a good four miles from that apex to the spot we chose for our home place, so we had all natural boundaries with good grass and water. There were trees enough for fuel and shade.

The first two weeks we worked fourteen hours a day building a cabin, cleaning out springs and throwing up a stable, pole corrals and a smoke-house. We had brought supplies with us and we pieced them out with what game we could shoot. By the time we had our building done, our stock had decided they were home and were fattening up in fine shape.

We had been riding together for more than six months, which isn't long to know a man you go partners with. Tap Henry was a shade over thirty while I had just turned twenty-two when he hit the South Fork. We had met working for the Gadsen outfit which took me on just west of Mobeetie while Tap joined up a ways further north. Both of us were a might touchy but we hit it off right from the start.

TAP HENRY showed me the kind of man he was before we had been together three days. Some no-account riders had braced us to cut the herd, and

their papers didn't look good to me nor to Tap. We were riding point when these fellers came up, and Tap didn't wait for the boss. He just told them it was tough, but they weren't cutting this herd. That led to words and one of these guys reached. Tap downed him and that was that.

He was a pusher, Tap was. When trouble showed up he didn't sidestep or wait for it. He walked right into the middle and kept crowding until the trouble either backed down or came through. Tall and straight-standing, he was a fine, upright sort of man except for maybe a might of hardness around the eyes and mouth.

My home country was the Big Bend of Texas but most of my life had been lived south of the border. After I was sixteen the climate sort of agreed with me better. Tap drifted toward me one night when we were riding herd up in Wyoming.

"Rye," he said, that being a nickname for Ryan Tyler, "an hombre could go down in those breaks along the Goodnight Trail and sweep together a nice herd. Every outfit that ever come over this trail has lost stock, and lots of it is still back there."

"Uh huh," I said, "and I know just the right spot for a ranch. Good grass, plenty of water and game." Then I told him about this place under the Pelado and he liked the sound of it. Whether he had any reason for liking an out-of-the-way place, I don't know. Me, I had plenty of reason, but I knew going back there might lead to trouble.

Two men can work together a long time without really knowing much about one another, and that was the way with me and Tap. We'd been in a couple of Comanche fights together and one with a Sioux war party. We worked together, both of us top hands and neither of us a shirker, and after awhile we got a sort of mutual respect, although nobody could say we really liked each other.

Our first month was just ending when Jim Lucas showed up. We had been expecting him because we had seen a lot of Bar L cattle, and had run a couple of hundred head off our triangle of range when we first settled. He was not hunting us this day because his daughter was with him, and only one hand. Red, the puncher, had a lean face and a lantern jaw with cold gray eyes and two low, tied-down guns.

Lucas was a medium-built man who carried himself like he weighed a ton. He sat square and solid in the saddle, and you could see at a glance that he figured he was some shakes. Betty was eighteen that summer, slim but rounded, tan but lovely, with hair a golden web that tangled the sunlight. She had lips quick to laugh and the kind that looked easy to kiss. That morning she was wearing homespun jeans and a shirt like a boy, but no boy ever filled it out like she did.

Right off I spotted Red for a cold ticket to trouble. He stopped his horse off to one side, ready for disturbances.

"Howdy!" I straightened up from a dam I was building across a beginning wash. "Riding far?"

"That's my question." Lucas looked me over mighty cool. Maybe I looked like a sprout to him. While I'm nigh six feet tall I'm built slim and my curly hair makes me look younger than I am. "My outfit's the Bar L, and this is my graze."

Tap Henry had turned away from the corral and walked down toward us. His eyes went from Lucas to the redhead and back. Me, I was off to one side. Tap wore his gun tied down but I carried mine shoved into my waistband.

"We're not riding," Tap replied, "we're staying. We're claiming all the range from the creeks to the Pelado."

"Sorry, boys," Lucas was still friendly although his voice had taken on a chill, "that's all my range and I wasn't planning on giving any of it up. Besides," he never took his eyes off Tap Henry, "I notice a lot of vented brands on your cattle. All I saw, in fact."

"See any of yours?" Tap was quiet. Knowing how touchy he could be I was worried and surprised at the same time. This was one fight he wasn't pushing and I was sure glad of it.

"No, I didn't," Lucas admitted, "but that's neither here nor there. We don't like outfits that stock vented brands."

"Meaning anything in particular?" Tap asked.

Quiet as he was there was a veiled threat in his tone now and Jim Lucas seemed suddenly to realize that his daughter sat beside him. Also, for the first time he seemed to understand that he was dealing with a different kind of man than he had believed.

"Meaning only," he said carefully, "that we don't like careless brands on this range or small outfits that start that way."

Tap was reasonable. More so than I had expected. "We rounded those cattle up," he explained, "from the canyons along the Goodnight. They are abandoned trail herd stock, and we got letters from three of the biggest outfits giving us title to all of their stuff we can find. Most of the other brands are closed out or in Montana. We aim to run this stock and its increase."

"Maybe. But run it somewheres else. This is my range. Get off it."

"Maybe you take in too much territory?" Tap suggested. "My partner and I aren't hunting trouble, but I don't reckon you hold any deed to this land from the government, the people or God. You just laid claim to it. We figure you got your hands full, and we lay claim to the triangle of range described."

"Boss," Red interrupted, "I've seen this hombre somewhere before."

Tap did not change expression but it seemed to me that his face went a shade whiter under the tan. Betty was looking worried and several times she had started as if to interrupt.

"We can be neighbors," Tap persisted. "We wanted our own outfit. Now we've got it and we intend to keep it."

LUCAS was about to make a hot reply when Betty interrupted. She had been looking at me. Everybody else seemed to have forgotten me and that pleased me just as well. My old gray hat was ragged on the crown and my hair hung down to my shirt collar. My buckskin pull-over shirt was unlaced at the neck, my jeans were patched and my boots were weather-worn and scarred by horns.

Betty said quietly, "Why don't you and your friend come to the dance at Ventana Saturday night? We would all enjoy having you."

Jim Lucas scowled and started impatiently as if to speak, but then he seemed to see me for the first time. His mouth opened, but he swallowed whatever it was he was going to say. What held him I do not know but he stared hard at me.

"Sure," I replied to Betty, "we would be glad to come. We want to be neighborly like my partner said. You can expect us."

Lucas wheeled his horse. "We'll talk about this again. You've been warned." He looked at Tap when he said it, and then started off with Betty beside him.

Red lingered, staring at Tap. "Where was it," he said, "that we met before?"

"We never met." Tap's voice was flat and hard. "And let's hope you don't remember."

That was more of a warning than I ever heard Tap give anybody. Usually, if you asked for it he just hauled iron and they planted you.

We started for the cabin together and Tap glanced around at me.

"Ever sling a six gun, Rye? If war comes we'll have to scrap to hold our land."

"If it comes," I pulled off my shirt to wash, "don't you worry. I'll hold up my end."

"That gal . . ." he commented suddenly, "really something, wasn't she?"

Now why should that have made me sore?

Saturday morning we shaved early and dressed for the dance. It was a long ride ahead of us and we wanted to get started. When I got my stuff out of my warbag I looked down at those worn and scuffed gun belts and the two six-shooters. Just for a minute there, I hesitated, then I stuffed a pair of old jeans in atop them.

Then I slicked up. My hair was long, all right, but my black broadcloth suit was almost new and tailored to fit. My clothes have to be tailored because my shoulders are so broad and my waist so slim I can never buy me a hand-me-down. With it I wore a gray wool shirt and a black neckerchief, and topped it off with my best hat, which was black and flat crowned.

Tap was duded up some, too. When he looked at me I could see the surprise in his eyes, and he grinned. "You're a handsome lad, Rye! A right handsome lad!" But when he'd said it his face chilled as if he had thought of something unpleasant. He added only one thing. "You wearing a gun? You better."

My hand slapped my waistband and flipped back my coat. The butt of my Russian .44 was there, ready to hand. That draw from the waistband is one of the fastest. There was no reason why I should tell him about the other gun in the shoulder holster. That was a new-fangled outfit that some said had been designed by Ben Thompson, and if it was good enough for Ben, it was good enough for me.

It was a twenty-five mile ride but we made good time. At the livery stable I ordered a bait of corn for the horses. Tap glanced at me.

"Costs money," he said tersely.

"Uh huh, but a horse can run and stay with it on corn. We ain't in no position to ride slow horses."

Betty was wearing a blue gown the color of her eyes and while there were a half dozen right pretty girls there, none of them could stand with her. The nearest was a dark-eyed senorita who was all flash and fire. She glanced at me once from those big dark eyes, then paused for another look.

Tap wasted no time. He had crossed the room to Betty and was talking to her. Her eyes met mine across the room, but Tap was there first and I wasn't going to crowd him. The Mex girl was lingering, so I asked for the dance and got it. Light as a feather she was, and slick and easy on her feet. We danced that one and another, and then an Irish girl with freckles on her nose showed up, and after her I danced again with Margita Lopez. Several times I brushed past Betty and we exchanged glances. Hers were very cool.

The evening was almost over when suddenly we found ourselves side by side. "Forgotten me?" There was a thin edge on her voice. "If you remember, I invited you."

"You also invited my partner, and you seemed mighty busy, so I . . ."

"I saw you," she retorted. "Dancing with Margita."

"She's a good dancer, and mighty pretty."

"Oh? You think so?" Her chin came up and battle flashed in her eyes. "Maybe you think—!" The music started right then so I grabbed her and moved into the dance and she had no chance to finish whatever she planned to say.

There are girl and girls. About Betty there was something that hit me hard. Somehow we wound up out on the porch of this old ranch house turned school, and we started looking for stars. Not that we needed any.

"I hope you stay," she said suddenly.

"Your father doesn't," I replied, "but we will."

She was worried. "Father's set in his ways, Rye, but it isn't only he. The one you may have trouble with is Chet Bayless. He and Jerito."

"Who?" Even as I asked the question the answer was in my mind.

"Jerito Juarez. He's a gunman who

works for Bayless. A very fine vaquero, but he's utterly vicious and a killer. As far as that goes, Bayless is just as bad. Red Corram, who works for Dad, runs with them some."

JERITO JUAREZ was a name I was not likely to forget, and inside me something turned cold. Just then the door opened and Tap Henry came out. When he saw us standing close together on the dark porch his face, in the light of the door, was not pleasant to see.

"I was hunting you, Betty. Our dance is most over."

"Oh! I'm sorry! I didn't realize . . . !"

Tap looked over her head at me. "We've trouble coming," he said, "watch your step."

Walking to the end of the porch, I stepped down and started toward the horses. Under the trees and in the deep shadows I heard voices.

"Right now," a man was saying, "ride over there and go through their gear. I want to know who they are. Be mighty careful, because if that Tap is who I think he is, he'll shoot mighty fast and straight."

Another voice muttered and then there was a chink of coins. In an open place under the trees I could vaguely distinguish three men.

The first voice added, "An' when you leave, set fire to the place."

That was the man I wanted, but they separated and I knew if I followed the two that went back toward the dance, then the man who was to burn us out would get away. Swiftly, I turned after the latter, and when he reached his horse he was in the lights from the dance. The man was a half-breed, a suspected rustler known as Kiowa Johnny.

Stepping into the open, I said to him, "You ain't going no place to burn anybody out. If you want to live, unbuckle those gun belts and let 'em fall. And be mighty careful!"

Kiowa stood there, trying to make me out. The outline of me was plain to him, but my face must have been in shadow. He could see both hands at my sides and they held no gun, nor was there a gun in sight. Maybe he figured it was a good gamble that I was unarmed. He grabbed for his gun.

My .44 Russian spoke once, a sharp, emphatic remark, and then acrid power smoke drifted and above the sound of the music within I heard excited voices. Kiowa Johnny lay sprawled on the hard-packed earth.

Wanting no gun fights or questions, I ducked around the corner of the dance hall and back to the porch where I had been standing with Betty. The door that opened to the porch was blocked by people, but all were looking toward the dance floor. One of them was Margita. Moving among them, I touched her arm and we moved out on the floor together.

Right away she knew something was wrong. She was quick, that girl. And then the music stopped and Jim Lucas was standing in the middle of the floor with Sheriff Fred Tetley.

"Kiowa Johnny's been killed," Tetley said. "Looks like he had a fair shake. Who done it?"

Tap was right in the middle of things with Betty and I saw Red frown as his eyes located him. Almost automatically, those eyes searched me out. He was puzzled when he looked away.

"Had it comin' for years!" A gray-haired man near me was speaking. "Maybe we won't lose so many cows now."

"Who killed him?" Tetley demanded irritably. "Speak up, whoever it was. It's just a formality."

My reasons for not speaking were the best ones, so I waited. Lucas put a hand on the sheriff's shoulder.

"Best forget it, Fred. His gun was half-drawn, so he made a try for it. Whoever shot him was fast and could really shoot. That bullet was dead center through the heart despite the bad light!"

His eyes went to Tap Henry, and then momentarily, they rested on me. Margita

had me by the arm and I felt her fingers tighten. When she looked up at me she said quietly, "You saw it?"

Somehow, something about her was warm, understanding. "I did it." My voice was low and we were a little apart from the others. "There are good reasons why nobody must know now. It was quite fair." Simply, then, but without mentioning Red, I told her what I had heard.

She accepted my story without question. All of them at the dance knew every effort would be made to run us off South Fork, so my story was no surprise. Some women could keep a secret and I was sure she was one of them.

That we were on very shaky ground here both Tap and I knew. It was not only Lucas. As the biggest of the ranchers, and the one whose actual range had been usurped, he had the most right to complain, but Bayless of the Slash B was doing the most talking, and from what I had heard, he had a way of taking the law into his own hands.

Tap joined me. "You see that shooting?" he asked. Then without awaiting a reply, he continued, "Guess he had it coming, but I wonder who did it? That's the kind of shooting Wes Hardin does or the Laredo Kid. Heard anything?"

"Only that Johnny had it coming. He was the kind who might be hired to drygulch a man or burn him out."

Tap glanced at me quickly, but before he could speak, Betty hurried up to us.

"You two had better go," she whispered, "there's some talk around and some of the men are hunting trouble."

She spoke to both of us, but she looked at me. Tap shifted his feet. "What do you expect us to do?" he demanded. "Run?"

"Of course not!" she protested. "But why not avoid trouble until I can talk some sense into Dad?"

"That's reasonable, Tap. Let's go."

"If you want to back down," his voice was irritable and he spoke more sharply than he ever had to me, "go ahead and go! I say face 'em and show 'em they've got a fight on their hands!"

The contempt in his voice got to me but I took a couple of deep breaths before I answered him. "Don't talk like that, Tap. When a fight comes, I'll be ready for it, only why not give Betty a chance? Once the shooting starts there'll be no more chance."

TWO men shoved through the door followed by a half-dozen others. My pulse jumped and I grabbed Tap's arm. "Let's get out of here! There's Chet Bayless and Jerito Juarez!"

How could I miss that lithe, wiry figure? Betty Lucas gave me a swift, measuring look of surprise. Tap shook my hand from his arm and shot me a glance like he'd give to a yellow dog. "All right," he said, "let's go! I can't face them alone!"

What they must be thinking of me I could guess, but all I could think of was facing Bayless and Jerito in that crowded room. And I knew Jerito and what would happen when he saw me. The crowd would make no difference, nor the fact that innocent people might be killed.

Betty avoided my eyes and moved away from my hand when I turned to say goodbye, so I merely followed Tap Henry out the door. All the way home he never said a word, nor the next morning until almost noon.

"You stay away from Betty," he said then, "she's my girl."

"Betty's wearing no brand that I can see," I told him quietly, "and until somebody slaps an iron on her, I'm declaring myself in the running.

"I don't," I continued, "want trouble between us. We've rode a lot of rivers together, and we've got trouble started here. We can hold this place and build a nice spread."

"What about last night?" His voice was cold. "You took water."

"Did you want to start throwing lead in a room full of kids and women? Be-

sides, fightin' ain't enough. Anybody with guts and a gun can fight. It's winning that pays off."

His eyes were measuring me. "What does that mean?" That I'd fallen in his estimation, I knew. Maybe I'd never stood very high.

"That we choose the time to fight," I said. "Together we can whip them, but just showing how tough we are won't help. We've got to get the odds against us as low as we can."

"Maybe you're right." He was reluctant to agree. "I seen a man lynched once because he shot a kid accidental in a gunfight." He sized me up carefully. "You seemed scared of those three."

We looked at each other over the coffee cups and inside I felt a slow hot resentment rising, but I kept it down. "I'm not," I told him, "only Chet Bayless is known for eight square killings. Down Sonora way Jerito is figured to have killed twice that many. That Jerito is poison mean, and we can figure on getting hurt even if we win."

"Never figured them as tough as all that," Tap muttered. Then he shot me a straight, hard glance. "How come you know so much about 'em?"

"Bayless," I said carefully, "is a Missourian. Used to run with the James boys, but settled in Eagle Pass. Jerito—everybody in Sonora knows about him."

The next few days followed pleasant and easy, and we worked hard without any words between us beyond those necessary to work and live. It irritated me that Tap doubted me.

On the fourth afternoon I was stripping the saddle off my steeldust when I heard them coming. A man who lives like I do has good ears and eyes or he don't live at all. "Tap!" I called to him low but sharp. "Riders coming!"

He straightened up, then shot a look at me. "Sure?"

"Yeah." I threw my saddle over a log we used for that and slicked my rifle out of the scabbard and leaned it by the shed door. "Just let 'em come."

They rode into the yard in a compact bunch and Tap Henry walked out to meet them. Bayless was there, riding with Jim Lucas, but Jerito was not. The minute I saw that I felt better. When they first showed I had stepped back into the shed out of sight. There were a dozen of them in the bunch and they drew up. Bayless took the play before Lucas could get his mouth open.

"Henry!" he said it hard and short. "You been warned. Get your stuff. We're burning you out!"

Tap waited while you could count three before he spoke. "Like hell," he said.

"We want no nesters around here! Once one starts they all come! And we want nobody with your record!"

"My record?" Tap had guts, I'll give him that. He stepped once toward Bayless. "Who says I—!"

"I do!" It was Red Corram. "You rode with that Roost outfit in the Panhandle."

"Sure did." Tap smiled. "I reckon not a man here but ain't mis-branded a few head. I ain't doing it now."

"That's no matter!" Bayless was hard. "Get out or be buried here!"

Lucas cleared his throat and started to speak.

Tap looked at him. "You feel that way, Lucas?"

"I'm not for killing," he said, "but—!"

"I am!" Bayless was tough about it, "I say they get out or shoot it out!"

Tap Henry had taken one quick glance toward the shed when they rode up and when he saw me gone he never looked again. I knew he figured he was all alone. Well, he wasn't. Not by a long shot. Now it was my turn.

Stepping out into the open, I said, "That go for me, too, Chet?"

HE turned sharp around at the voice and stared at me. My hat was pulled low and the only gun I wore was that .44 Russian in my waistband. I took another step out and a little bit toward the trail which put Bayless in a bad spot. If he turned to face me his side was to

Tap. "Who are you?" Bayless demanded. He was a big blue-jowled man, but right now the face under those whiskers looked pale.

"The name is Tyler, Chet. Ryan Tyler. Don't reckon you ever heard *that* name before, did you now?" Without turning my head, I said to Tap, but loud enough so they could all hear me. "Tap, if they want to open this ball, I want Bayless."

They were flabbergasted, you could see it. Here I was, an unknown kid, stepping out to call a rancher known as a gunman. It had them stopped, and nobody quite knew what to say.

"Lucas," I said, "you ain't a fool. You got a daughter and a nice ranch. You got some good boys. If this shooting starts we can't miss Bayless or you."

It was hot, that afternoon, with the clouds fixing up to rain. Most of the snow was gone now, and there was the smell of spring in the air.

"Me, I ain't riding nowhere until I've a mind to. I'm fixing to stay right here, and if it's killing you want, then you got a chance to start it. But for every one of us you bury, you'll bury three of you."

Tap Henry was as surprised as they were, I could see that, and it was surprise that had them stopped, not anything else. That surprise wasn't going to last, I knew. Walking right up to them, I stopped again, letting my eyes sweep over them, then returning to Bayless.

"Why don't you get down, Chet? If you go for that gun you better have solid footing. You don't want to miss that first shot, Chet. If you miss it you'll never get another.

"You aimed to do some burning, Chet. Why don't you get down and start your fire? Start it with a gun like your coyote friend did?" Without shifting his eyes Bayless stared, and then slowly, he kicked one foot out of a stirrup. "That's right, Chet. Get down. I want you on the ground where you don't have so far to fall. This hombre," I said it slow, "paid Kiowa Johnny to burn us out. I heard 'em. I gave Johnny a chance to drop his guns and would have made him talk, but he wanted to take a chance. He took it."

"You killed Johnny?" Lucas demanded, staring at me. "He was supposed to be a fast man with a gun."

"Him?" The contempt was thick in my voice. "Not even middling fast." My eyes had never left Bayless. "You want to start burning, Chet, you better get down."

Chet Bayless was bothered. It had been nigh two years since he had seen me and I'd grown over an inch in height and some in breadth of shoulder since then. My face was part shaded by that hat and he could just see my mouth and chin. But he didn't like it. There was enough of me there to jar his memory and Chet Bayless, while fast with a gun, was no gambler. With Jerito or Red there, he would have gambled, but he knew Red was out of it because of Tap.

"Lucas," I said, "you could be riding in better company. Bayless ain't getting off that horse. He's got no mind to. He figures to live awhile longer. You fellers better figure it this way. Tap and me, we like this place. We aim to keep it. We also figure to run our own cows, but to be fair about it, any time you want to come over here and cut a herd of ours, come ahead. That goes for you—not for Bayless or any of his gun-handy outfit."

Chet Bayless was sweating. Very careful, he had put his toe back in the stirrup. Jim Lucas shot one glance at him, and then his old jaw set.

"Let's go!" He wheeled his horse and without another word they rode away.

Only Red looked back. He looked at Tap, not me. "See you in town!" he said.

Henry called after him. "Any time, Red! Just any time at all!"

When the last of them had gone he turned and looked at me. "That was a tough play, kid. S'pose Bayless had drawed on you?"

"Reckon he'd of died," I said simply enough, "but I didn't figure he would.

Chet's a cinch player. Not that he ain't good with that Colt. He is—plenty!"

Walking back, I got my rifle. "Gosh amighty, I'm sure hungry!" I said, and that was all. What Tap thought of it, I had no idea. Only a couple of times I caught him sizing me up. And then the following night he rode off and I knew where he was riding. He was gone a-courting of Betty Lucas.

That made me sore but there was nothing I could do about it. He sort of hinted that Margita was my dish, but that wasn't so. She was all wrapped up in some vaquero who worked for her old man, although not backward about a little flirtation.

One thing I knew. Chet Bayless was going to talk to Jerito and then they were going to come for me. Jerito Juarez had good reason to hate me, and he would know me for the Laredo Kid.

Me, I'd never figured nor wanted the name of a gunfighter, but it was sort of natural-like for me to use a gun easy and fast. At sixteen a kid can be mighty touchy about not being growed up. I was doing a man's job on the NOB outfit when Ed Keener rawhided me into swinging on him. He went down, and when he came up he hauled iron. Next thing I knew Keener was on the ground drilled dead center and I had a smoking gun in my hand with all the hands staring at me like a calf had suddenly growed into a mountain lion right before them.

Keener had three brothers so I took out and two of them cornered me in Laredo. One of them never got away from that corner, and the other lived after three months in bed. Meanwhile, I drifted into Mexico and worked cows down there. In El Paso I shot it out with Jerito's brother and downed him, and by that time they were talking me up as another Billy the Kid. They called me Laredo for the town I hailed from, but when I went back thataway I went into the Nueces country where the third Keener braced me and fitted himself into the slot of Boot Hill alongside his brothers.

AFTER that I'd gone kind of hog-wild, only not killing anybody but some ornery Comanches. Howsoever, I did back down a sheriff at Fort Griffin, shot a gun out of another's hand in Mobeetie and backed down three tough hands at Doan's Crossing. By that time everybody was talking about me so I drifted where folks didn't know Ryan Tyler was the Laredo gun-fighter.

Only Chet Bayless knew because Chet had been around when I downed the Keeners. And Jerito knew.

After that I quit wearing guns in sight and avoided trouble all I could. That was one reason this out-of-the-way ranch under the Pelado appealed to me, and why I avoided trouble all I could.

It must have been midnight and I'd been asleep a couple of hours when a horse came hell a-whoppin' down the trail and I heard a voice holler the house. Unloading from my bunk I grabbed my rifle and gave a call from the door. Then I got a shock, for it was Betty Lucas.

"Rye! Come quick! Tap killed Lon Beatty and a mob's got him! They'll hang him!"

No man ever got inside of his clothes faster than me, but this time I dumped my warbag and grabbed those belted guns. Swinging the belts around me, I stuck my .44 Russian into my waistband for good measure and ran for my horse. Betty had him caught and a saddle on him so all I had to do was cinch up and climb aboard.

"They are at Cebolla!" she called to me. "Hurry!"

Believe me, I lit a shuck. That steeldust I was on was a runner and chock full of corn. He stretched his legs and ran like a singed cat so it wasn't long until the lights of Cebolla showed. Then I was slowing down with a dark blob in the road ahead of me with some torches around it. They had Tap, all right, had him backwards on his horse with a rope around his neck. He looked mighty gray around the gills but was cussing them up one side and down the other. Then

I came up, walking my horse.

"All right, boys!" I let it out loud. "Fun's over! No hanging tonight!"

"Who says so?" They were all peering my way, so I gave it to them.

"Why, this here's Rye Tyler," I said, but down Sonora way they call me Laredo, or the Laredo Kid. I've got a Winchester here and three loaded pistols, and I ain't the kind to die quick, so if some of you hombres figure you'd like to make widows and orphans of your wives and kids, just start reaching.

"I ain't," I said, "a mite particular about who I shoot. I ain't honing to kill anybody, but knowing Tap, I figure if he shot anybody it was a fair shooting. Now back off, and back off easy-like. My hands both work fast so I can use both guns at once. That figures twelve shots if you stop me then, but I got a Winchester and another gun. Me, I ain't missed a shot since I was eleven years old, so anybody fixin' to die sure don't need to go to no trouble tonight!"

Nobody moved, but out of the tail of my eye I could see some change of expression on Tap's face.

"He reached first," Tap said.

"But he was just a kid!" Who that was, I don't know. It sounded like Gravel Brown who bummed drinks around Ventana.

"His gun was as big as a man's," Tap said, "and he's seventeen, which makes him old as I was when I was segundo for a fighting outfit driving to Ogalalla."

Brown was no fighter. "Gravel," I said, "you move up easy-like and take that noose off Tap's neck, and if you so much as nudge him or that horse they'll be pattin' over your face with a spade come daybreak."

Gravel Brown took that noose off mighty gentle. I'd walked my horse up a few steps while Gravel untied Tap's hands, and then restored his guns.

"You may get away with this now, Tyler," somebody said, "but you and Tap better take your luck and make tracks. You're through here. We want no gunslingers in this country."

"No?" That made me chuckle. "All right, amigo, you tell that to Chet Bayless, Red Corram and most of all, Jerito Juarez. If they go, we will. Until then, our address is the Pelado, and if you come a-visiting, the coffee's always on, if you come hunting trouble, why I reckon we can stir you up a mess of that." I backed my horse a couple of feet. "Come on, Tap. These boys need their sleep. Let 'em go home."

We sat there side by each and watched them go. They didn't like it, but none of them wanted to be a dead hero. When they had gone, Tap turned to me.

"Saved my bacon, kid." He started riding, and after aways he turned to me. "That straight about you being the Laredo gunfighter?"

"Uh huh. No reason to broadcast it."

"And I was wondering if you'd fight! How foolish can a man be?"

IT set like that for a week, and nobody showed up around South Fork and nobody bothered us. Tap he went away at night occasional, but he never said anything and I didn't ask any questions. Me, I stayed away. This was Tap's play, and I figured if she wanted Tap she did not want me. Her riding all that way sure looked like she did want him; though. Then came Saturday and I saddled up and took a pack horse. Tap studied me, and said finally, "I reckon I better side you."

"Don't reckon you better, Tap," I said, "things been too quiet. I figure they think we'll do just that, come to town together and leave this place empty. When we got back we'd either be burned out or find them sitting in the cabin with Winchesters. You hold it down here."

Tap got up. His face was sharp and hard as ever, but he looked worried. "But they might gang you, kid. No man can buck a stacked deck."

"Leave it to me," I said, "and we've got no choice anyway. We need grub."

Ventana was dozing in the sun when I walked the steeldust down the main alley of the town. A couple of sleepy old codgers dozed against the sun-backed front of a building, a few horses stood three-legged at the tie rail. Down the street a girl sat in a buckboard, all stiff and starched in a gingham gown, seeing city life and getting broken into it.

Nobody was in the store but the owner himself and he was right pert getting my stuff ready. As before, I was wearing three guns in sight and a fourth in that shoulder holster under my jacket. If they wanted war they could have it.

When my stuff was ready I stashed it near the back door and started out the front. The storekeeper looked at me, then said, "You want to live you better high-tail it. They been waiting for you."

I shoved my hat back on my head and grinned at him. "Thanks, Mister, but that sure wouldn't be neighborly of me, would it? Folks wait for me shouldn't miss their appointment. I reckon I'll go see what they have to say."

"They'll say it with lead." He glowered at me, but I could see he was friendly.

"Then I guess I can speak their language," I said. "Was a time I was a petty fluent conversationalist in that language. Maybe I still am."

"They'll be in the Ventana Saloon," he said, "and a couple across the street. There'll be at least four."

When I stepped out on the boardwalk about twenty hombres stepped off it. I mean that street got as empty as a panhandler's pocket so I started for the Ventana, watching mighty careful and keeping close to the buildings along the right hand side of the street. That store across the street where two of them might be was easy to watch.

An hombre showed in the window of the store and I waited. Then Chet Bayless stepped out of the saloon. Red Corram came from the store. And Jerito Juarez suddenly walked into the center of the street. Another hombre stood in an alleyway and they had me fairly boxed. "Come in at last, huh?" Bayless chuckled. "Now we see who's nestin' on this range!"

"Hello, Jerito," I called, "nobody hung you yet? I been expecting it."

"Not unteel I keel you!" Jerito stopped and spread his slim legs wide.

Mister, I never seen anything look as mean and ornery as that hombre did then! He had a thin face with long narrow black eyes and high cheek bones. It wasn't the rest of that outfit I was watching, it was him. That boy was double-eyed dynamite, all charged with hate for me and my kind.

"You never seen the day," I said, "when you could tear down my meat-house, Jerito." Right then I felt cocky. There was a devil in me, all right, a devil I was plumb scared of. That was why I ducked and kept out of sight, because when trouble came to me I could feel that old lust to kill getting up in my throat and no smart man wants to give rein to that sort of thing. Me, I rode herd on it, mostly, but right now it was in me and it was surging high. Right then if somebody had told me for certain sure that I was due to die in that street, I couldn't have left it.

My pulse was pounding and my breath coming short and I stood there shaking and all filled with wicked eagerness, just longing for them to open the ball.

And then Betty Lucas stepped into the street.

She must have timed it. She must have figured she could stop that killing right there. She didn't know Chet Bayless, Corram and those others. They would fire on a woman. And most Mexicans wouldn't, but she didn't know Jerito Juarez. He would have shot through his mother to kill me, I do believe.

Easy like, and gay, she walked out there in that dusty street, swinging a sunbonnet on her arm, just as easy as you'd ever see. Somebody yelled at her and somebody swore, but she kept coming, right up to me.

"Let's go, Rye," she said gently, "you'll be killed. Come with me."

Lord knows, I wanted to look at her,

but my eyes never wavered. "Get out of the street, Betty. I made my play. I got to back it up. You go along now."

"They won't shoot if you're with me," she said, "and you must come, *now!*" There was awful anxiety in her eyes, and I knew what it must have taken for her to come out into that street after me. And my eyes must have flickered because I saw Jerito's hand flash.

Me? I never moved so fast in my life! I tripped up Betty and sprawled her in the dust at my feet and almost as she hit dust my right-hand gun was making war talk across her body, lying there so slim and lovely, angry and scared.

Jerito's gun and mine blasted fire at the same second, me losing time with getting Betty down. Something ripped at my sleeve and then I stepped over her and had both guns going and from somewhere another gun started and Jerito was standing there with blood running down his face and it all twisted with a kind of wild horror above the flame stabbing .44 that pounded death at me.

Bayless I took out with my left hand gun, turning him with a bullet through his right elbow, a bullet that was making a different man of him, although I didn't know it then.

He never again was able to flash a fast gun.

Jerito suddenly broke and lunged toward me. He was blood all over the side of his head and face and shoulder, but he was still alive and in a killing mood. He came closer and we both let go at point blank range, but I was maybe a split second faster and that bullet hit bone.

When a bullet hits bone a man goes down, and he went down and hard. He rolled over and stared up at me.

"You *fast!* You . . . *diablo!*" His face twisted and he died right there, and when I looked up Tap Henry was standing alongside the Ventana Saloon with a smoking gun in his hand, and that was a Christian town.

That's what I mean. We made believers out of them that day in the dusty street on a warm, still afternoon. Tap and me, we made them see what it meant to tackle us and the town followed the ranchers and they followed Jim Lucas when he came down to shake hands and call it a truce.

Betty was alongside me, her face dusty, but not so pale any more, and Tap walked over, holstering his gun. He held out his hand, and I shook it. We'd been riding partners for months, but from that day on we were *friends.*

"You and me, kid," he said, "we can whip the world! Or we can make it plumb peaceful! I reckon our troubles are over."

"No hard feelings?" One of my arms was around Betty.

"Not one!" He grinned at me. "You was always head man with her. And us? Well, I never knowed a man I'd rather ride the river with!"

THERE'S more cattle on the Pelado now, and the great bald dome of the mountain stands above the long green fields where the cattle graze, and where the horses' coats grow shining and beautiful, and there are two houses there now, and Tap has one of them with a girl from El Paso, and I have the other with Betty.

We came when the country was young and wild, and it took men to curry the roughness out of it, and we knew the smell of gunsmoke, the buffalo chip fires, and the long swell of the prairie out there where the cattle rolled north to feed a nation on short grass beef.

We helped to shape that land, hard and beautiful as it was, and the sons we reared, Tap and me, they ride where we rode, and when the day comes, they can carry their guns, too, to fight for what we fought for, the long, beautiful smell of the wind with the grass under it, and the purple skies with the slow smoke of home fires burning.

All that took a lot of building, took blood, lead, death and cattle, but we built it, and there she stands, boys. How does she look now?

By
HAROLD
PREECE

The warrior aimed his musket at Smithwick

The true story of famous Texas Ranger Noah Smithwick

THE FRAIL young fellow felt no more chipper than did most Texas fighting men, that chill January night of 1836. Just two hours before, he had taken the Ranger oath at this frontier outpost called Hornsby's Fort. Now he sat moodily eating his supper and cursing the fate that had steered him away from the major battles shap-

Caballero of the Colorado

ing up in Mexico's rebellious province. He had wanted to go on to San Antonio with the regular Texas soldiers now garrisoned in the old Spanish mission called the Alamo. But his friend and superior, Colonel Davy Crockett, had sternly shaken his head.

"Nobody expects Noah Smithwick to whip Santa Anna by his lonesome." Crockett, like his younger comrade, spoke in the soft drawl of the Tennessee hills. "You fought with that fever in the battle of Concepcion. Now go home and throw it off with whiskey and quinine. Then join up with the first outfit that comes handy."

Twenty - eight - year - old Smithwick thought that Davy Crockett looked sicker than he. Malaria was taking its toll of the Texas soldiers who'd held out in the miasmic swamps against the overwhelming smartly-trained legions of Mexican Dictator Vicente Lopez de Santa Anna.

Young Noah had taken a part of this advice, but it hadn't been the medical part. Crockett's back had no sooner turned than he'd joined the Ranger company of Captain John J. Tumlinson, organized to defend sparsely populated Western Texas frontier against Indians. But it had irked Smithwick that he'd landed with a corps of young boys and old men considered unfit for extensive military service.

Woman Reaches Ranger Camp

He was lifting the cup of brackish coffee to his lips when the young white woman stumbled into the camp and collapsed by the fire. The Rangers jumped up to revive her when they saw her torn, ragged clothing and exhaustion.

Reuben Hornsby, who'd built the fort, poured a draught of brandy down her quivering, mumbling lips. The woman revived, glanced wildly at the Rangers, saw she was among Texans, and moaned:

"My baby—my baby! The Comanches have him. They killed my other child and—"

Smithwick detached himself from his comrades and seated himself on a log beside her. "Just tell everything that happened," he said kindly. "The Texas Rangers will bring your baby back."

The woman regained her control and in a hard, taut voice rehearsed a tragedy all too common in pioneer Texas. Her name was Mrs. Hibbons. With her husband, brother, and two youngsters, she'd been returning by wagon to her home on the Guadalupe River, fifty miles south of the fort. All of the family had died in a Comanche ambush except herself and a three-year-old son taken prisoner by the red warriors.

After the attack, the Comanches had camped in a cedar brake on the Colorado River near the present site of Austin. Confident that she would not leave her surviving child, they had left the white woman unbound and unguarded.

She had been torn by indecision. There was small chance that her relatives in Texas would ever learn what had happened. If she made no break for escape, another day's march would take the war party far out of the radius of the last white settlements. Years could elapse before she and the child would be ransomed by white traders. Meanwhile, the boy might grow up an adopted Comanche waging bitter war against his own people.

Finally, she'd made up her mind. She'd carefully covered the child, slipped out from the Comanche camp then wandered all night and till late afternoon through the briars and cactus, guessing the approximate location of the nearest settlement. Finally, she'd seen milch cows grazing in peaceful river bottom and knew she was nearing some patch of civilization.

As Smithwick listened, he realized that the distraught mother, wandering in circles, had taken almost twenty-four hours to cover ten miles. He put down his coffee cup. "Come on boys" he said grimly. "Supper can wait. Comanches won't."

The Rangers sprang into the saddle and, guided by Reuben Hornsby, headed due north along the Colorado river bottoms. Thick winter darkness descended. Hornsby, one of Texas earliest and best frontier scouts, became fearful that they might

lose the trail. Captain Tumlinson was uncertain of what course to take till the young Tennessean spurred to his side.

Smithwick Offers Advice

"It's a gamble, Cap'n," Smithwick said. "But I figure the Comanches won't move far from their camp. They'll be trying to find Mrs. Hibbons who's worth a lot of ransom from the Santa Fe traders. Best wait till daylight, pick up the trail, then ride hard."

Captain Tumlinson nodded. "Reckon so, Noah. You know Comanches better than any man in this outfit. Shod plenty of their horses when you were blacksmithing and they were peaceful."

"They'd have been peaceful yet," Noah Smithwick said quietly, "if they'd been treated like humans and not varmints."

All that night, Smithwick's head throbbed with the fever. He felt light and dizzy when the sun came up over the gloomy live oak thickets. But he forced his feet firmly in the stirrups and rode on with his comrades.

They came up on the Comanches at ten a.m. as the Indians were just breaking camp. "*Los Rangeros,*" a warrior shouted in Spanish. "*Vamos!*"

The Comanches fled toward the cedar jungle, leaving behind their loot from the captured wagon and all but whatever arms they hastily grabbed. Smithwick's fast horse became excited, and dashed square into the middle of the fleeing Indians.

A warrior jumped behind a tree and aimed at the Ranger with an old-fashioned single-shot musket. Smithwick knew that the weapon was now empty. He sprang from his frightened mount and dashed after the brave on foot.

Ten feet from the warrior, he pulled the trigger of his carbine. The brave dropped with a gasping sigh in a patch of briar. Far in advance of his mounted comrades, the lone Texan ran on shooting at the rest of the warriors.

Now the other Rangers were catching up with Smithwick. The Comanches were being lost to sight—all but one in a buffalo robe who rode slowly and uncertainly behind the war party. Smithwick felt sicker than ever realizing that they might recover stolen horses and goods but not the lost child.

Smith saw that the lagging Indian was riding on a mule rather than a horse—an odd mount for a Comanche warrior. Now remounted, he galloped toward the mule. Quavering little cries came from inside the buffalo robe. Pulling aside the robe, he saw the missing child of Mrs. Hibbons, it's legs bound with cords to the mule.

A day or so later, he delivered the child into the mother's arms, back at Hornsby's Fort.

Suddenly, he found that his sickness was over. His sinews no longer felt dull and languid, his arms had their old strength. He realized, then, that much of his sickness had been disappointment because he'd been left behind while other Texas veterans had marched to San Antonio. He knew, like many another man since, that no man anywhere can ride with a greater or more gallant fighting force than the Texas Rangers.

On March 2, San Antonio fell to the crack troops of Santa Anna. The one hundred and fifty Texans, garrisoning the Alamo, died to the last man before the onslaught of four thousand Mexicans. Noah Smithwick felt the lasting shadow of a great man across his life when he learned that Davy Crockett, fighting from his sickbed, had killed twenty of the enemy before they closed in and riddled the doughty Tennessean with bullets.

Two days later, delegates from all the settlements proclaimed the Texas Republic in a blacksmith shop at Washington-on-the-Brazos. Noah Smithwick was one of the few Texans who believed it to be more than a last defiant gesture. Santa Anna intended to depopulate the province of the troublesome American settlers, who were packing up and fleeing toward the United States border of the Sabine River. The Texas army, commanded by General Sam Houston, was in full retreat toward the same boundary. Nobody was left in Bastrop, then the furthermost western

Texas settlement, except Smithwick and his twenty-one Ranger comrades.

Hordes of invading Mexicans were pouring into the section. Smithwick and a Ranger yet to take his first shave, sixteen-year-old Jim Edmundson, were detailed to supervise the orderly evacuation of settlers in that grim episode known to history as the Runaway Scrape. In addition, they were told to remove herds of cattle from the Colorado's west bank to its uninhabited east bank so that they might not fall to the commissary of Santa Anna's invaders.

Rangers on Guard

It was not the first time that a pair of Texas Rangers had been ordered to guard territory infested by thousands of enemies, nor would it be the last time. Smithwick and the boy, hardly out of knee breeches performed their difficult task in the best traditions of that great force.

Once, they sighted a heavily armed corps of six hundred Mexicans directly across the river from them. Quickly, they reined their horses to a cat walk and crept away without the invaders seeing them. All the settlers safely evacuated, the Rangers joined in the general retreat of Texans eastward toward the Sabine.

With a heavy heart, Noah Smithwick rode along. He'd come to Texas when he was nineteen. It had offered opportunities that a free workman could not find in the Old South where all labor was done by slaves. All of this would now be forgotten. The thriving colonies of the American settlers, the sturdy schools and churches they had built. Their farms would go back to grass, owls and prairie dogs would move in to occupy their towns. And the memory of the greatest light cavalrymen who ever sat saddles—the Texas Rangers—would be forgotten with the rest.

Then the unexpected happened.

On the late afternoon of April 21, 1836, the Rangers heard the sound of heavy fire on the banks of the San Jacinto River, eighty miles from the United States border. The timidity of a new Ranger commander kept them from galloping off immediately to join the fighting. When they reached there several hours after the firing had stopped, they saw the proud Mexican dictator and his troops, abject prisoners in the custody of General Houston's victorious Texans.

Noah Smithwick had just missed being a veteran of the immortal battle that established the Texas Republic and paved the way to its becoming the biggest state of these United States. In the darkest moments, some glimmer of faith had told him that Texas would win. Now the Rangers had one of the biggest jobs ever undertaken in their long history. They had to serve as an advance guard for the settlers returning joyfully to their deserted homes. They had to guard tons of war spoils captured from Santa Anna lest it fall into the hands of outlaws who'd crossed the Sabine six jumps ahead of a sheriff.

They had a third task that was hardest of all—protecting the peaceful Texas Mexicans from plunder and slaughter by these same outlaws.

Loyal Mexicans Aid Texas

Smithwick knew Mexico and Mexicans as he did Texas and Texans. He knew that the Texas Revolution might have been lost had the Mexicans of that state sided with Dictator Santa Anna and given him help during the invasion. But freedom-loving people, they had contributed few soldiers to his army. Indeed, many of them had joined the Texas forces to fight for freedom under Sam Houston.

The Ranger reined his pony to a sudden halt, that day, when he saw six evil-faced men surrounding a Mexican home near Cole's Settlement on the Colorado. The men glared at him; an aged bronzed woman came running to grasp his bridle.

"Señor," she gasped. "My husband, my son, die fighting for Texas. I alone. These men call me traitor—want all my horses and cattle."

Smithwick wheeled and faced the six.

"Where are your discharge papers from San Jacinto?" he demanded.

The leader of the gang shifted uneasily in his saddle. "Lost 'em, Ranger. Anyhow, this woman's just a Mexican."

Smithwick's hand flew to his holster. His gun covered the gang.

"So's Lorenzo de Zavala, the vice-president of Texas, a Mexican," he rasped. "So's many another good Texan and patriot I can name."

He rode up close and rammed his pistol in the side of the outlaw. "You fellows never saw San Jacinto and never fought an honest fight." He pointed his finger east. "The Sabine's that way, mister. You and your pardners better head for it and better get there quick."

The scared outlaws left in a hurried lope. They didn't stop till they reached the Sabine. Then a sheriff's posse in Louisiana grabbed them the minute they crossed over, wet and dripping, from Texas.

The Mexicans of the Lone Star Republic had learned there was one Gringo Texan they could trust. The Comanches also considered Noah Smithwick a brave and honorable man. Now that there was peace between Texan and Mexican, the wiser chiefs of the powerful tribe hoped that there might be peace between Texan and Comanche. As honorable men, the chiefs decided to take the first steps in burying the tomahawk.

In the summer of 1837, two of their chiefs and six of their warriors came carrying a white flag to the Ranger camp known as Coleman's Fort on Walnut Creek. They said that they wanted to make a treaty of trade and friendship with the whites.

They asked that Ranger Noah Smithwick be sent among them as a commissioner to negotiate the treaty.

"'Tis a trick, Noah—a bloody heathen trick to slaughter ye," whispered Ranger Felix McClusky who'd come to Texas straight from Ireland. "Bid 'em to begone or I'll hand 'em what St. Patrick handed rattlesnakes."

Smithwick shook his head. "Don't worry, Felix. They asked me because they know me."

He strode toward one of the chiefs. "All right, Eagle, when do we start for your camp?"

Smithwick Visits Comanches

Noah Smithwick was the very first Texan who got to know the Comanches intimately. He was welcomed by their head chief, Muguara, who gave him the adopted name of Juaqua. During his three months among them, he found much to admire among a people who most of his countrymen dismissed as "bloodthirsty savages."

Courageous and even brutal toward enemies, the Comanches were inordinately kind to each other and to such captives as they adopted. He never saw adult tribesmen squabble about anything. Children were never spanked, and a Comanche would have been drummed out of the tribe had he hit a youngster for any cause.

The six captives, if they could be called such, were an Anglo-Saxon woman and two boys, a Mexican woman and her two sons. Only the Mexican *mujer* expressed any desire to return to her people. The white woman had almost forgotten English, having been captured while a little girl. She had married a Comanche and borne him several children.

Smithwick quickly learned the Comanche language and put the words down in writing. Years later, he wished that he'd kept the notes because it was probably the first written vocabulary of the tongue ever made by any American. He listened to the old chiefs tell the story of their wrongs, and he realized that justice was not all on the side of white Texans.

They told him how one band of their people had been invited to a feast by some traders, only to be fed poisoned beef that killed many braves. They thought that the whites were divided into tribes like Indians. It was beyond their understanding that the settlers in one section of Texas should become angry when they were at

warfare with those in another part.

Patiently, Noah Smithwick tried to explain whites to Indians as he hoped later to explain Indians to whites. Some day, he hoped that ancient wrongs would be succeeded by new rights and responsibilities for redskin Americans who were the oldest Americans. But his heart told him he would never live to see that day.

While he was with the Comanches, their allies, the Wacos, had been set upon by the whites in what was probably an unjustified attack. The Waco chief felt that the indignity must be wiped out by white blood. He marched with his warriors to the Comanche camp, demanding that the distinguished Texan, Noah Smithwick, be handed over for death by torture.

But aged chief Muguara drew himself up to his full height and thundered:

"No! This man is our friend, and you must walk over my dead body to reach him. Lay one finger on him and not one of you shall get away to tell the tale!"

The Comanches would break a firm alliance to protect the life of an individual who came from another people they were fighting. As Noah Smithwick sat down with the chiefs to make a treaty, he felt that the Comanches would faithfully abide by its terms. He hoped that his fellow whites would.

The treaty provided that a trading post would be built on Brushy Creek where the Comanches could come and swap their buffalo hides and deerskins for blankets and supplies. A responsible white man agreed to take charge of the post. And the tomahawk was to be buried forever.

Chiefs Call on Houston

Smithwick went with a delegation of five chiefs to see General Sam Houston, now president of the Texas Republic, who solemnly ratified the treaty. Then the chief asked through Smithwick, their interpreter, if the President would set aside a certain part of Texas for Comanches and keep whites from trespassing in it.

President Houston, who had lived many years among the Cherokees, shook his head sadly.

"My friends," he spoke to the chiefs with Smithwick translating. "If I could build a wall from the Red River to the Rio Grande so high that no Indian could scale it, the white people would go crazy trying to think up means to get over it."

The chiefs wanted their Ranger friend to be the high commissioner who would enforce the treaty. Had Smithwick accepted, hundreds of lives on both sides might have been saved, years of bloody Indian warfare might have been avoided. But his term of enlistment was expiring, and the pretty girl promised to him was anxious that he get on with the business of making a home.

As it was, the office was never filled and the trading post was never built. At the end of the year, the chiefs and warriors brought their hides and furs to Brushy Creek, expecting to trade. But when they saw only bare prairie and no sign of a building, they quietly went back to their camps and picked up the tomahawk.

Ex-Ranger Smithwick became one of the first settlers and public leaders of the Texas hill country stretching west magnificently to the Rio Grande, six hundred miles away. But when Texas seceded from the Union, he left never to return. He could not in conscience support the Confederacy after his father had fought to create one undivided country in George Washington's army. He was nearing ninety-two when he died, the last survivor of Tumlinson's heroic company, in California on October 21, 1899.

But up and down the Colorado River of Texas, they still spin tales about him. They call him by many names of valor. But most often they describe him as did one of the last Comanches who left Texas. They refer to him as "the Caballero of the Colorado." Caballero is Spanish for cavalier. He was that and more.

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Next Month: SCOURGE OF THE SMUGGLERS by Harold Preece

Hardcase McHugh earns two hundred dollars—with one shot!

Fuller dropped his gun

TROUBLE SHOOTER

By SAM BRANT

FOLKS call me "Hardcase" McHugh and usually figure I am a right salty hombre. Being an obliging sort of cuss, I've tried to live up to their expectations. I've got one of those long faces that make horses nod when they see me like they were meeting an old friend. I'm tall in the saddle and long on foot.

I wear two guns, though I never could shoot worth a hoot with my left hand. Most times I don't need even to try, for the Colt in my right hand takes care of the situation nicely, thank you. Besides, that second gun comes in right handy when there is need of five more bullets without reloading. Sure, I know those guns carry six cartridges, but I always keep an empty under the hammer when I'm not using them. It's an old family custom, or something.

It was a nice balmy morning in midsummer when I rode into the little cowtown called Black Rock. Why they named it that, I never have been able to figure, for there wasn't a good-sized rock within a mile of the place. As towns go Black Rock went from one end of a dusty street to the other and then quit.

I headed my roan for the hitching-rail in front of a saloon called the Grand Palace according to the sign painted across the front of it. It didn't look like either of those names. It was just an old one-story building, and the windows sure needed a good washing. You couldn't see the glass for the dirt.

At the hitching-rail I swung out of the saddle like a fellow who has done a heap of riding since sunup and wasn't likely to forget it right away. There was an old man dressed in range clothes and wearing a gray beard, sitting on a bench in front of the saloon watching me. I didn't mind. The old man looked like he didn't have much fun, anyway.

I tied the roan's reins to the rail and then loosened the saddle cinch. Since I aimed to stay around town for awhile I figured the horse might as well be comfortable. Always kind to dumb animals and humans, that's Hardcase McHugh every time.

"Morning," said the gent with the whiskers as I stepped up on the plank walk. "Who are you?"

"You know, I've often wondered about that," I said thoughtfully. "Some figure it one way and some the other. Hard to tell which is right."

He blinked and opened his mouth. He sort of reminded me of the head of a bear rug, only the teeth were missing.

"I'm Matt Buckley," he said. "The oldest cititzen of Black Rock. I'll be eighty-eight my next birthday, if I live that long."

"You sure of that?" I asked.

"That I'm eighty-eight?" said Buckley. "Of course I'm sure of it. Got my birth certificate to prove it."

"I don't mean that," I said. "Are you sure you really are Matt Buckley?"

WHILE he was thinking that one over, a tall thin man with thick, dark hair stepped out through the swinging doors of the saloon. He was dressed like a professional gambler. I have often wondered what sort of clothes an amateur gambler wears, but never happened to run across one of them.

"There!" the old man said in a tone of relief. "Les Harlan will tell you that I'm Matt Buckley."

"Didn't say I doubted it," I said with a grin. "Just wondered if you were sure of it."

Les Harlan looked me over like a man trying to make up his mind about buying a horse. I felt like telling him I was the owner's pet and not for sale.

"Two-gun man, eh?" he said casually, as though most of his friends carried at least six. "Mind if I ask your name?"

"Not if you put it that way," I said. "The name is Hardcase McHugh."

"Hardcase McHugh, the trouble-shooter," Harlan said. "I've heard of you. They say you are a dangerous man."

"Scare myself half to death most of the time," I said with a grin. "But then I'm so impulsive."

"Of course, I'm Matt Buckley," said the old-timer to no one in particular.

"You sure are, Matt," I said soothingly. "Who told you that you weren't?"

"Why, you—" Buckley just couldn't finish it. He got to his feet, said. "What I need is a drink. This has been a bad morning. Yessir, a bad morning!"

For a man of his age he showed plenty of speed in going through the swinging doors. Harlan grinned and then his expression grew serious.

"You picked the wrong town when you came to Black Rock, McHugh," he observed. "I own the saloon and the hotel here, so I hear a lot that goes on. There's a man in town who's been doing a lot of boasting that he is going to down Hardcase McHugh on sight."

"A friend of mine, no doubt," I said. "What's his name?"

"Red Fuller," said Harlan.

"Never heard of him," I said. "But then I can't know everybody. What does this Fuller do for a living when he isn't hunting my scalp?"

"He's a professional gunman, whose guns are for hire to the highest bidder." Les Harlan frowned. "I suspect someone has hired Fuller to try and get me, but he hasn't succeeded yet."

Amazement ran wild in the revolving squirrel cage that I use for a brain. Here was Les Harlan, who I suspected was the boss of the town and points hither and yon, telling me that a professional gunman named "Red" Fuller had been hired to get him and hadn't succeeded yet. Harlan talked about it in the same tone he might have mentioned liking two cups of coffee for breakfast.

"With Fuller aiming to down me on sight, it looks like we are in the same boat, Harlan," I said. "And it is right dry weather for it."

"True," said Harlan. "Maybe we better team up on this, Hardcase."

"Just among friends, my first name is Johnny," I said. "My folks had too much brains to christen me anything like Hardcase. That's just a little nickname I picked up in my travels."

I glanced at a bunch of riders who had just arrived in town and were trotting along the street. There were eight of them and as they drew closer I saw that all the horses were branded Bar W. Quick as a flash I realized this was some local ranch outfit. The way I can read sign sure amazes me at times.

"Adam Ware and his Bar W outfit," Harlan said. "I suspect that Ware hired Fuller to get me."

"With seven men working for him?" I said. "He sure needs an army to do a job."

"The men with him are just cowboys, not gunmen," Harlan said. "He needs a real gunnie to get me. But come on inside and have a drink and I'll tell you more about it."

"You know, I must have had some idea of getting a drink when I stopped at this place," I said. "But I plump forgot all about it."

I FOLLOWED Harlan in through the swinging doors of the Grand Palace. The inside of the place wasn't much more to look at than the outside. It was just a

cowtown saloon—a bar over to one side, a few poker tables and chairs scattered around. Harlan sure let his imagination burst forth when he named the place the Grand Palace, if he did name it.

There were a couple of men in range clothes standing at the bar. Old Matt Buckley was sitting alone at a table with a glass of liquor in front of him. He looked at me and then started mumbling to himself.

I expected Adam Ware and his outfit to stop and come in for a drink, even though I gathered that Harlan and the Bar W outfit were not what could be called right friendly with each other. Much to my surprise, they rode right on by.

"There's another saloon in town, at the lower end of the street," Harlan said drily. "The Four Aces. It gets most of the business from the ranch outfits around here." He scowled. "That's because Adam Ware claims that I'm crooked."

Having just met Les Harlan, I didn't feel like saying that I thought he was as honest as the day is long. I have known some mighty short days in my time. I just nodded as we stepped up to a vacant spot at the bar, which sure wasn't hard to find.

"Give my friend Hardcase McHugh a drink from my private stock, Tim," Harlan said loud enough to make a pin drop—a bowling pin. "Want him to have the best of everything."

A big man who was standing alone a short distance away at my right made a grab for his gun as he heard Harlan's words. He changed his mind about the whole thing when he found that I had him covered with my right-hand Colt. I noticed that he had red hair.

"Don't tell me you are Red Fuller," I said, giving him one of those steely glances that I keep for occasions such as this. "The hombre who aimed to down me on sight?"

"That's Fuller," Harlan said. "I didn't even notice he was in here."

Right then I decided that Les Harlan was what I would call a "slow" liar. If a man who was trying to get me was anywhere around, I sure wouldn't overlook him in a large crowd consisting of four men, counting old Buckley and the bartender and leaving Harlan and me out of it. The saloon owner didn't look like he needed glasses, but I could be wrong about that.

"Just why are you so anxious to get me, Fuller?" I asked, still covering the big gunman with my Colt. He sure needed a shave. "You never saw me before, and I never saw you either. Lucky me!"

"I'll tell you why," growled Fuller. "Because I know you were sent for to take over this town and get me! So I tried to get you first."

"Un-huh," I said, dropping my right-hand Colt back into the holster. "Don't try it again. Fun is fun, but a bullet is much too permanent."

Deliberately I turned my back on Fuller. I poured a drink from the bottle of Harlan's private stock sitting on the bar in front of me. Fuller paid for his drinks and walked out of the saloon.

Old Matt Buckley got up from his table and staggered over to me. Even at twenty-two instead of eighty-eight he would have been pretty drunk.

"Who am I?" he demanded.

"Napoleon," I said.

" I knew it!" Buckley wailed. "I don't even know my own name!" He shuddered. "Better go home and sleep it off, then maybe I'll remember." He headed for the door, traveling in circles, and finally made it and disappeared outside.

"Can't let the old boy go home feeling that way," I said quickly. "Got to tell him his right name. I'll be back in a minute."

I hurried to the swinging doors and stepped outside before Harlan, the bartender and the other man still in the bar could stop me. When I see a gambler edging his hand beneath his coat toward a gun in a shoulder holster, a bartender going down behind the counter as though to come up with a double-barreled shotgun, and a rat-faced stranger with fingers edging toward his gun, I aim to be some place else in a hurry. Old man Buckley's departure made a right good excuse to leave.

The fresh air outside the Grand Palace sure felt good. I didn't have to wonder why there was no law in Black Rock. I knew the sheriff had been shot in the back and killed two weeks ago. His deputies had resigned as of then, figuring they would live longer that way.

I went to my horse, untied the reins and then swung into the saddle. I always could think better sitting down. Black Rock was a trail-drive town—at least, one of the

main trails leading eastward passed close to it. I guess that was why they had a big pole corral down at the lower end of the town.

THERE was a good reason for me being called the "Trouble-shooter." I was just that. I had arrived in Black Rock because I was supposed to be there. If I had been just traveling for my health I would have gone somewhere else. From what I had seen of the little cowtown, I had a feeling it wouldn't be healthy for me very long.

I rode on down toward the corral just as Adam Ware and the rest of the Bar W men came out of the Four Aces and headed in that direction. Some of them were walking, and three of them got their horses and rode down. I noticed that Red Fuller was with them, talking a lot about something. I was too far away to hear what he was saying.

The whole bunch stopped in front of the corral. I could hear Fuller's words clearly now as I rode closer.

"You're sure going to lose that bet, Ware," he said. "Didn't think you had the nerve to take me up on it."

"If you want to lose two hundred dollars, that's all right with me," Ware said. He was a thin, middle-aged man. "You bet that you could shoot a silver dollar, that you carry around on a chain with you for luck, out of my hand."

"That's right," said Fuller. "And I won't come near your hand doing it."

I swung out of the saddle and left the roan ground-hitched. No one paid any attention to me as I walked over and stood near the corral. They were all watching Ware and Fuller.

"Here you are," Fuller said, handing the owner of the Bar W a silver dollar attached to a short steel chain. "Just stand over there, hold it out at arm's length, and I'll shoot it right out of your hand."

Ware took the silver dollar and held it out by the chain. Fuller stepped back a little, drew his gun. My right hand came up, holding a Colt. I fired, creasing Fuller's right arm so that he dropped his gun. I grabbed the butt of my second gun but didn't draw it.

"You nearly fell for the old target trick, Ware," I said. "Fuller was going to miss the silver dollar and kill you. Since he had a two-hundred-dollar bet coming, no one would think he would be fool enough to down the man who was expected to pay him. Everybody would figure it was an accident, of course."

"You might be right, at that," Ware said, dropping the silver dollar like the chain had burned his fingers. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Hardcase McHugh," I said. "Folks call me the trouble-shooter." I looked hard at the owner of the Bar W. "Did you hire Red Fuller to try and down Les Harlan for you?"

"Of course not," said Ware. "Why should I? Since I've convinced everybody around that Harlan is crooked, the Grand Palace hasn't been doing enough business to keep going. If it keeps up that way, Harlan will be forced to sell out and leave town."

"Un-huh," I said. "So he hired Fuller to try and get you, but told me it was the other way around. Guess he figured that if you were dead, the other ranchers and their men might forget all the talk about his being crooked and the Grand Palace would be back in business."

Right then Les Harlan fired a wild shot at me as he stepped out from behind a couple of horses. Evidently he had been standing there listening and heard the whole thing. I shot him in the right shoulder and he dropped his gun.

"Your trying to down me is what I'd call the actions of a guilty man, Harlan," I said. "That was a fool play!"

"It sure was," Fuller said angrily. "Next time I let a man hire me to do a job I'll try and pick one with brains!"

There came an angry roar from the Bar W outfit. I had a feeling that Harlan and Fuller were in plenty of trouble.

"Looks like I sent for the right man when I sent for you, McHugh," Ware said. "Didn't even know you had arrived in town yet."

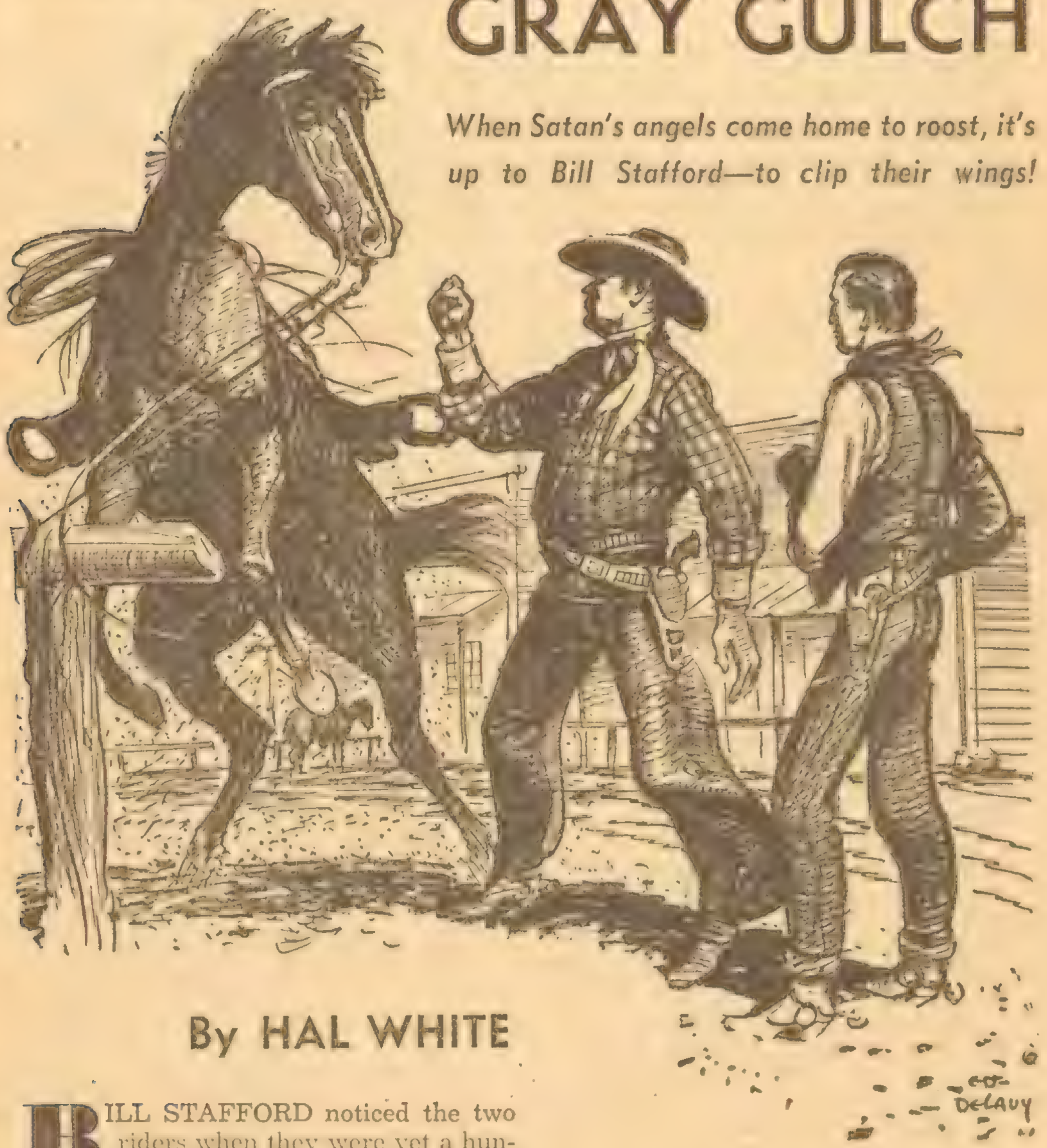
"I'm here," I said. "And that will be two hundred dollars for the job."

"It's worth it," said the owner of the Bar W, reaching into his pocket and drawing out a thick roll of bills. He peeled off two hundred dollars and handed the money to me. "Just what I would have lost if Fuller had won that bet."

"That's right," I said, as I pocketed the money. "But this way, you stay alive!"

RED SUNDOWN IN GRAY GULCH

When Satan's angels come home to roost, it's up to Bill Stafford—to clip their wings!



By HAL WHITE

BILL STAFFORD noticed the two riders when they were yet a hundred yards from the hotel steps where he was sitting. Even at that distance, and with the dust of Gray Gulch's long main street rising thick about them, there was something disturbingly familiar about the pair.

The lighted match in the hand of the young hotel clerk halted halfway to the cigarette between his lips. His eyes clicked to a sudden, probing focus on the approaching riders, and his lean frame went rigid.

The hot bite of the match flame on his

fingertips broke his concentration. With a startled curse, he flung away the glowing stub, then took the unlighted cigarette from his mouth.

Eyes fixed as though hypnotized on the advancing riders, he sat very still, one hand between his knees, his long, strong fingers nervously crushing the unlighted cigarette. The June breeze caught the dropping tobacco fragments, carried them along the worn wooden steps in a small brown-and-white flurry.

The breeze was warm and the sun of late afternoon shone full upon the seated figure. But in the pit of Bill Stafford's stomach was an icy coldness that grew and spread as the riders loped near and his suspicions became certainty. He had seen Nick Considine and Pete Leavitt only once, and that was more than three years before. But the memory of them, and of what they had done to him, had been a fevering disease in his blood ever since.

Perhaps now, the crisis of that disease —a crisis which could either kill or cure— might be as close as those two looming, gun-hung renegades coming down the street.

THEY were halting now at the hitch-rail of the Lazy Stirrup Saloon, across the street from the hotel. They swung off their weary horses, looped the reins loosely around the hitchrail. Several other horses were tied there and one of them, stamping flies, grazed Leavitt's boot with a front hoof.

The burly renegade swore savagely and swung a heavy fist at the animal's tender nose. The horse reared, snorting with pain and terror, and Stafford was instantly on his feet.

"No more of that, fella!" he shouted.

Both men whirled on him, hands slapping at their holsters. When they saw a slender, bare-headed young man, unarmed, they relaxed.

"Your horse, mebbe?" Leavitt sneered.

"Don't have to be my horse," Stafford retorted. "Where I come from, a horse is a horse."

"That so?" Leavitt grinned, showing stained teeth in the bearded, dusty mask of his face. "Where we come from, a man's a man. So maybe you'd like to make something of it, huh?"

Considine gestured impatiently. "Come on, Pete. Quit the argufying. Let's hoist a few. I'm that puckered, I can't spit!"

Thin and wiry, he caught the arm of his heavier companion, and the two of them ducked under the hitch-rail, stepped onto the sidewalk and shouldered through the batwing doors.

The yellow batwings swung briefly, returned to rest. The two new horses hung their heads tiredly and switched without enthusiasm at the flies which beseiged their sweating flanks.

A dust devil spun an erratic course along the road, showering fresh dirt on the double row of false fronts, then, like some prankish kid, veered suddenly and disappeared between buildings. The long main drag dreamed again in the Texas sunshine.

To all outward appearances, young Bill Stafford was as calm as the scene around him. Only a certain grimness about his mouth showed his anger. But beneath his leather vest, as he walked into the hotel, his heart beat heavily and emotion tore at his insides.

"Where we come from, a man's a man." For reasons known only to himself, that jab hurt. It hurt like the devil. Bill Stafford had always wondered what he would do if those two came back. Now they were here, Satan's own angels come home to roost, and the situation was right in Stafford's lap.

"Those two look like tough babies." A traveling man named Paulson stopped Stafford just inside the doorway with the comment. "You know them?"

"Couple of long-riders on the way to the Border," Stafford evaded. "It's only a hop, skip and jump south of here, you know."

"Maybe they figure to spend the night here."

"They can't," Stafford said shortly. "We've only got a dozen rooms and every one's taken for tonight. Ranch folks in

for a Saturday evening fling, and traveling men."

Paulson brushed cigar ash from his paunch. "Suits me just as well. Pair like that could plumb spoil a nice, quiet evening."

"I doubt if they'll even try to stay," Stafford said. "Probably on a high lope ahead of the law, right now. Stop to cut the dust with a shot of redeye, and go on."

"Hope so," Paulson said, and strolled over to join the other loungers in the row of chairs near the window.

Stafford crossed to the high oak desk, stepped behind it and stood with his elbows on the wood and his chin in his hands. His gaze went through the double doors, open to the sun and air, across the street to the front of the saloon, to the horses dozing there, to the yellow batwings.

He ought to be doing something. He ought to be going over there. He knew it, but something held him back. His hand went unconsciously to his side, where once a gun had hung. No gun was there now. His mind went back. He shut his eyes, drew an impatient hand across them as though to brush away a memory.

IT WAS seared on his brain—the picture of the gunfight in the Lazy Stirrup Saloon three years before. The card game—Considine's cheating—his own challenge—the instant leap and roar of guns and the tearing agony of lead in his flesh.

Stafford had been a cowboy then and a pretty fair hand with a six-gun, but Considine was chain-lightning. A puncher who had come into town with Stafford, from the Bar X, and who made the fourth at the poker table, had grabbed iron to aid Stafford. His gun was not half out of leather when Leavitt's slug disarmed him.

That did it. Stafford had started it, but Considine and Leavitt had finished it—and how!

The other puncher was not badly hurt, but they took Bill Stafford to the home of Sheriff Tom Ainslee, who had an extra bedroom in his big house, and there for many days Stafford had fought the terrible agony in his bullet-torn body, fought to live at all.

Somehow he lived. But he could never have made it if it had not been for the constant care of the old sheriff and his wife, Beth, and the skill of old Doctor Blake.

Finally he was up and around again, but he put off going back to the ranch. He helped the sheriff with his garden and chickens, played cards at the Lazy Stirrup, slept a lot. That was all right for a while. He had to get his strength back and he was doing it. But when Hank McCurran, who owned the Travelers' Rest hotel, offered him a job clerking there, he took it.

And right then, old Tom Ainslee spoke his mind.

"You know, son," he said, "me and Ma have come to think a mighty lot of you. We seen you lying there, smiling when the pain must have been nigh to killing you. Putting up a fight every minute—a man's fight. That's why I hate to see you letting us down now."

"Meanin' what, Tom?"

"Meaning you got no tarnation business behind a hotel desk, that's what! Fellow can be a hotel clerk, or whatever, and still be a lot of man. But *you're* running away from something, taking that job!"

"That's not it, Sheriff," Stafford argued. "I like it in town. Never realized till now how much nicer and easier it is than punching cows. Man's got more chance, too. Me, I'll own that hotel someday—maybe half the town besides. You wait."

But lanky old Tom Ainslee was not convinced. "Go back to the ranch, Bill," he urged. "They're asking for you, out there. Buckle on your iron again. Do it now. Longer you put it off, the harder it'll be. And you'll hate yourself worse every day."

The sheriff was right. He did hate himself. Physically, he was as fit as ever, though sometimes, when the weather was bad, he would have an ache in his middle,

where the slug had torn through. But it was nothing compared to the never-ceasing ache in his heart. Something had to be done about that.

His thoughts broke off now. Considine and Leavitt were entering the lobby, their boots heavy on the board floor as they crossed to the desk where Stafford waited.

Stafford's lean, muscled body was tense in spite of himself, but his gray eyes were cool and steady, and his voice, when he spoke, had the soft Texas drawl that went with his looks.

"Howdy, gents!"

The two halted before the desk. Each dropped a duffel bag on the floor with a thump and a cloud of dust arose. Considine, who had somehow the look of a starved and dangerous hyena, fixed Stafford with an unwinking stare. No apparent recognition, as yet. The blocky Leavitt leaned an elbow on the desk top and let his gaze rove.

"The best room in the house," demanded the lean Considine, "for two gents that take nothing less. And be fast about it, flunky!"

Stafford regarded them steadily. It was plain that they were spoiling for trouble, would seize on any excuse to start it. But the fact remained that the hotel's rooms were all taken for the night.

"Sorry, gents," the clerk said quietly, "but we're full up."

CONSIDINE scratched with a long forefinger at the dusty scraggle of beard on his cheek. The lobby had grown suddenly silent, the loungers almost holding their breaths as they watched and listened. The lean renegade turned to his partner.

"You hear that, Pete? Full up, the man says."

Leavitt cuffed back his flop-brimmed sombrero, and grinned. "Now ain't that just plain hell, Nick? And us wore to the hipbones with ridin' too."

He looked away, then suddenly back again at Stafford. "Nick," he announced, "we're forgetting our manners. This here's an old friend."

Considine stared, then his face went grimmer than ever. "Danged if it ain't! I got an argument with you, feller. When you and me had that there ruckus three year ago, you clipped my ribs with the one shot you got off. She festered, bad. I dang near cashed in."

Stafford laughed coldly. "That makes us even," he retorted.

"Not in my book, it don't," Considine said flatly. He looked Stafford up and down. "Last time we met, you was packing an iron. What you done with it?"

Leavitt chortled. "Reckon he musta figgered them things was for me and give it up."

Considine nodded. "Yeah. Now about that room—"

"I told you once, we're full up," Stafford said bluntly.

"Hmmm," mused Considine, and his fingers caressed the notched walnut butt of his six-gun. "That ain't the right answer, seems like, hombre."

Stafford watched those long fingers on the gun, and his stomach muscles knotted with the memory of the agony it had inflicted. He forced himself to speak with calmness.

"It's the only answer you're going to get, Mister."

Leavitt cut in. "Uh-huh," he said. "Watch!" Then he was striding across the lobby toward the loungers near the window. He halted before Paulson, the drummer, who sat grimly chewing on an unlighted cigar and looking the hard-case right in the eye.

"You," snarled Leavitt. "What's your name?"

"Paulson," said the drummer, coolly. "C. J. Paulson, of Chicago. What's yours?"

"I'll ask the questions," snapped Leavitt. "You answer 'em! You got a room in this here flea bag?"

"I have, yes."

Leavitt smirked. "Mister, you *did* have—once. You ain't now. Get up to it and move your stuff out!"

"That room is mine!" The paunchy, mid-

dle-aged drummer was on his feet. "I registered for it. I paid for it. You can't—"

Pete Leavitt's hard fist cut him off. The blow lifted Paulson's heels clear off the floor, dumped him on his shoulders in a corner.

An angry growl went up from the loungers, but only one man acted. A gray-haired rancher named Hendershot leaped up, hand stabbing for his gun. No one saw Leavitt's hand move, but his gun was suddenly out and flaming. The rancher's heavy iron flew from his fist, hit the floor and skidded.

Henderson stood as though stunned with surprise, his left hand clutching his wounded forearm, the blood oozing between his tight fingers.

"Anyone else feel lucky?" Leavitt's cold tones cut the silence.

No one moved, no one spoke. Hendershot sank back in his chair, his face white. Considine turned to Stafford.

"All right, you seen what can happen," he said. "Now you and Mister What's-his-name get upstairs and move his stuff out. And be fast about it!"

Blind anger nearly overcame Bill Stafford's judgment then, but he managed to control himself. To defy those guns now would get him nothing but a beating, or maybe even a slug. Nick Considine, itching for revenge and fortified with red-eye, would stop at nothing.

Stafford shrugged, came out from behind the desk. Leavitt was herding the dazed Paulson over, and Stafford steadied him with a hand under his elbow as they climbed the stairs. Considine followed with drawn gun, while Leavitt stayed in the lobby.

"You'll have the law on those fellows, of course?" Paulson muttered in Stafford's ear as they went up.

"Sure will," Stafford said, voice low. "Best to play along with 'em now, though. They're feeling their drinks."

LAW, STAFFORD thought as he stood in Paulson's room and watched the drummer gather his things and put them in his valise. Yes, there was Sheriff Tom Ainslee. But Tom was out of town somewhere, far out, serving a warrant.

A good thing he was, Stafford reflected. The grizzled old badge-toter still had his courage and his savvy. But his draw had slowed and his eyes were going back on him. He couldn't even start with Nick Considine or Pete Leavitt. But he'd try, Stafford knew, and get himself killed doing it.

Was there anyone else to challenge these two, then? Not likely. Gray Gulch knew, too well, the speed and the temper of the renegade pair. Let them take over, run things—they'd be gone soon. And a man would lie a long time in boot hill.

"Where do I stay tonight, then?" Paulson was standing, packed bag in hand, ready to go.

"You can hang on a clothesline and flap, for all of me," said Nick Considine. "Git—both of you!"

Going down the stairs, Paulson repeated his question. "Where do I stay? I can't sleep in the alley."

Stafford hesitated. "Mrs. Barker, in the big green house two blocks east, sometimes takes a roomer," he said.

Paulson eyed him. "You mean you won't have this cleared up so I can get back in my room by bedtime?"

"The sheriff's out of town," Stafford said uncomfortably.

"But there must be other guns, other men. Or are there?"

"There used to be a deputy, but he got killed a year ago," Stafford explained. "Nobody ever took his place."

C. J. Paulson snorted with deep scorn, and marched out of the hotel with his big valise banging his legs. The other loungers had already gone. Leavitt came over to where Considine and Stafford were standing.

"It's most suppertime," he said. "You got a dining room?"

"You can eat at the Regal Restaurant, three doors down," Stafford told them.

Considine grinned evilly. "Let's go to *our* room, Pete, and get washed up all nice for supper and tonight." He paused,

eyes narrowing on Stafford. "This gent might crave to meet me, later, across the street, an' I'd sure hate to go dirty to boot hill!"

Leavitt laughed raucously and started up the stairs, Considine following. Leavitt turned.

"Stable and feed our horses, flunky!" he called.

Then the two disappeared, and a door slammed on Pete Leavitt's gloating laughter.

Ben Foster, the hotel's man-of-all-work, entered through the rear door.

"Hear tell we got a couple of snakes in town," he said. "Trouble, huh, Bill?"

Stafford shrugged. "Put up their horses, will you Ben? The bay and the black, over there in front of the saloon. Then tend the desk. I'm going out for a little."

"Little what?" asked Ben. "Drink, maybe? Should think you could use it. Heard they was the same two you tangled with three years gone."

"That's right," nodded Stafford.

The lean-faced stableman looked awed. "I was in the Lazy Stirrup that night," he said. "Gosh! Either of them two could slap a rattler's jaw and never get touched! I don't envy Tom Ainslee his job tonight."

"Tom's out of town," Stafford said.

"He is, huh?" Foster rubbed his chin, his gaze traveling soberly up and down Stafford's lean, well-knit figure. "This here village," said Foster finally, "needs a good deputy, seems like."

Stafford drew a long breath. "Their horses are out front, Ben," he said.

"Heard you the first time, Bill," grinned Foster, and departed.

STAFFORD rolled a smoke, lighted it, and set out down street for the office of Doctor Blake. Hendershot, pale and sweating, was on a chair in the doctor's office and the physician was just fixing a sling for the rancher's bandaged right forearm.

"Bad?" Stafford asked.

"Not good," the doctor answered. "It'll heal, but it'll take time."

"Yeah," Stafford nodded. "Yeah, I sure know how that is!"

He pulled nervously on the cigarette as Blanke put the final touches on the sling.

"That'll do it, for now, Charlie," the doctor said. "Stop in tomorrow, and let me look at it."

"Thanks, Doc." Henderson moved to the door, stood there with his hand on the knob. He looked straight at Stafford. "At least, I tried," he said bitterly, and left.

Stafford felt sick inside. The old doctor busied himself with cleaning up the bloodstained equipment he had used, and said nothing.

"Doc," Stafford said then.

"Yes?" The old medico looked up.

"That wasn't just Charlie Hendershot talking. He was saying what this whole town thinks—of me. But Nick Considine put three slugs into me—that night in the saloon. You know that."

Blake nodded. "I don't know to this day how you lived, Bill. Nine out of ten, hit like you were, would never have got off the floor alive. But now you're as good as ever—except for one thing, eh?"

"Doc, that's the thing I can't stand any longer. If I don't look at Nick Considine across a gun barrel tonight, I can never look myself in the face again. That's the straight of it."

"You should have thought of that three years ago," Blake said flatly. "I tried to tell you, so did others. You tackle that gun slick tonight and you'll never look *anybody* in the face again—unless maybe St. Peter. There's no sense getting—Hey, where you going?"

"So long, Doc," said Stafford quietly, and walked out.

Back at the hotel, he went up to his own tiny room at the far end of the second-floor hallway. He closed the door and locked it. Dimly, from the room at the other end of the hall, he could hear Leavitt laughing. He opened the bottom drawer of his bureau, took out a holstered .45 attached to a full cartridge belt.

With steady fingers, he buckled the belt around his slim waist. Its weight felt good

He took the gun from its holster, looked it over carefully. It was a beautiful weapon, clean, well-oiled, ready for action. Except for one thing: it was not loaded.

Stafford thrust the gun back in its holster, faced a small mirror on the opposite wall, about the height of a man's chest. A moment he stood, arms relaxed at his sides. Then his fingers blurred to the gun butt, so fast that the weapon seemed to leap halfway to meet them. The big iron came up, centered on the mirror, and the hammer beat a tattoo on the firing pin.

Again he tried it, and again—with no one to see, no one to say if he were good or bad. But Bill Stafford knew. He was good—more than good. And why not?

Every Sunday, for a year past, and often in the long summer evenings when the daylight lingered, he had forked the horse he kept in the hotel stable and ridden out, the gun and belt carefully out of sight until he was in the hills, with no one to watch him.

Out there, he practiced for hours at a time—drawing, triggering, sometimes without shells, sometimes with live ammunition in the chambers to test his aim.

HE HAD been using real shells one Sunday afternoon, kicking a tin can along the ground with one slug after another until the gun was empty. He was standing, reloading, when a voice spoke behind him. "Son, that was mighty nice shooting. Mighty nice!"

Stafford whirled to see old Tom Ainslee sitting his horse and grinning.

"Sheriff, I—I didn't want anybody to know," Stafford stammered. "I—it's just—"

"If I could shoot like that," said the old lawman, "I'd want everybody and his grandma to know. What you hiding for, Bill?"

Stafford stood silent, avoiding the keen blue eyes that seemed to search his very soul. Ainslee dismounted, walked over and gripped Stafford's muscled shoulders in his big hands.

"I need a deputy, Bill," the lawman said earnestly. "That's why you been practicing, ain't it? In private, till you felt you was good enough to come out in the open? Well, you don't need to wait any longer, son. I'll be mighty proud and confident to pin a star on you. And in no time at all I'll be retiring and you'll be sheriff."

Stafford groped for words. "I'm not ready yet, Tom. Pretty soon, though I'll let you know."

Ainslee's fingers loosened on the younger man's shoulders, and his voice came dull and heavy. "Guess I understand. Figgered you was through running, Bill, but seems like I was wrong."

He turned, strode to his horse, swung into the saddle.

"Sheriff!" Stafford's call halted him, and he turned. "It won't be long. But for now, just don't say anything about me being out here, huh?"

"I won't," Ainslee promised. "And if and when you're ready to shoot at something besides rocks and tin cans—something that can shoot back!—I'll be waiting."

Stafford stood in his room, now, remembering. It was bitter business.

With sudden decision, he loaded the heavy gun, thrust it in the holster, opened the door. He had just stepped into the dim hallway when the door at the front end opened and the two hardcases emerged. A shaft of late sunlight coming through a window winked on the brass heads of shells in their belts, and their ugly laughter drifted to his ears as they clumped down the stairs.

A long moment Stafford wavered there, his hand on the doorknob. Then with a despairing curse between his teeth, he turned again into his room, unbuckled the gun-belt, dropped it into the drawer.

He sat on the bed edge and tried to roll a cigarette, but it wouldn't shape right, somehow. He gave it up and went downstairs. Ben Foster was at the desk.

"Go eat, Ben," he told the stableman. "Take your time. I'm in no hurry."

Foster left. When he returned, he had news.

"Them two was at the Regal," he announced. "Ordering folks around, but nobody took them up on it. No trouble. But

they was heading for the Lazy Stirrup, last I seen, and hell could bust there before the night's done. You going over?"

"Maybe—later."

Foster thought a moment. "Tonight," he said at last, "I kind of wish I was an honest-to-gosh gun-slinger. Maybe somebody'll call them fellers yet. Hope so. 'Tain't fitting a town should knuckle under to their kind. 'Tain't fitting nohow."

Shaking his head, he disappeared stableward.

STAFFORD sat behind the desk, pretending to be busy. Darkness came and he lighted the lobby's oil lamps, saw light fan from the Lazy Stirrup across the street.

The batwings swung incessantly, and from inside came laughter and loud talk and singing. Stafford listened, tension building up in him.

But he was upstairs, lighting the hallway lamps, when he heard the shots—a quick fusillade of them, and then silence.

Stafford raced downstairs, across the lobby and onto the porch. Thin smoke drifted out above the batwings of the Lazy Stirrup, but there wasn't a sound from inside the saloon. Then the batwings opened and four men came out, carrying another in their midst.

Window light struck briefly on the grey head of the victim as the quartet started down the street with him. Stafford's throat was suddenly tight with realization.

"Oh, not him! Not Tom Ainslee! Not—"

And then he was running, vaulting the hitch-rail, crossing the street in a cloud of dust, to intercept the grim procession on the sidewalk. One look was enough. It *was* Tom Ainslee. "What happened?" he demanded. "How bad is it?"

"Them two hardcases," gritted Bert Holman. "Tom come back sooner'n he expected, seems like, and when he heard what was going on— Well, you know Tom. He come shoving through them batwings and he got off two shots. Missed. Then the thin one nailed him. That's the story, Bill."

The four were walking slowly, supporting the limp body of the old lawman on a stretcher of their crossed arms. "How bad?" Stafford asked, walking alongside.

The answer came, strangely, from the sheriff himself. "Just stand me on . . . my feet . . . a minute, boys," he whispered. "I . . . got something to say."

Startled, they hesitated, then carefully they lowered the booted feet to the walk, held the old badge-toter upright. Ainslee turned his gaze on Stafford and the once-keen blue eyes now held all their old fire.

"Bill," he said, "hold up your right hand. I'm making you my deputy. Maybe sheriff 'fore the night's out, but deputy right now."

"But Tom," Holman protested, "Bill can't cut it. You're just asking him to commit suicide! It ain't in the cards!"

"Bill, hold up your right hand!" The command came strongly, and the old lawman's eyes flashed as Stafford raised his right hand. "Repeat after me—"

When the oath was done, Ainslee's fingers touched the star on his blood-soaked shirt. "Pin this on him, Bert."

Holman obeyed, muttering a warning in Stafford's ear as he did so. "He's probably dying, so humor him, Bill. But stay away from those two toughies. They just ain't human! There's not a man in this town could cut it with either of them, let alone both!"

Stafford's mouth twisted. "Least of all me, huh?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. Hurry now, take Tom to the Doc's office. I'll be along soon as I finish."

"If you insist on meeting up with those two, brother, you sure will be!" said Holman soberly.

He turned and the four men raised the sheriff, whose head was now sagging weakly. "Just a second, boys," Ainslee murmured. Then: "Bill."

"Yeah, Tom."

"This is something that can shoot back, son. But when you get through with them hyenas, they'll be"—a grin tugged at the lawman's mouth—"just a couple of torn tin cans. See yuh—*sheriff!*"

Stafford nodded, not trusting himself to

speak, and the group moved on quickly. He crossed at once to the hotel, C. J. Paulson was standing in the doorway.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Little shooting," Stafford said shortly.

"About my room, Stafford—"

Stafford flung his reply over his shoulder. "Stick around. You'll have your room."

WHEN he was in his own room, buckling on his gun, slapping the holster, testing his draw. He went out into the hall and down the stairs, forcing himself to keep on going, though his stomach was all tied in knots.

He passed Paulson, and the drummer's eyes popped. "Holy smoke!" he muttered, and started to follow. But at the sidewalk edge he thought better of it and halted.

"No," he cautioned himself. "This is one time C. J. Paulson would rather be in the peanut gallery than in the baldheaded row."

Stafford crossed the street, boots padding softly, the thick dust rising about him. Over the hitch-rail, onto the sidewalk. The tight knot in his stomach was painful now, but he kept on walking. A man had to live with himself; if he couldn't do that, he was better in boothill.

He pushed quietly through the batwings, stood a moment in the shadows, eyes darting to take in the setup. Most of the men in the long barroom had prudently retreated from the bar to the booth tables, well away from the dangerous pair leaning on the mahogany.

Stafford took two steps forward in the sawdust aisle and his star glinted in the full light of the overhead lamps. Considine yelped a warning and went for his iron, while the few men at the bar flung themselves headlong across the aisle, out of the line of fire.

It was the strangest thing, but in that instant Stafford's dread and fear vanished as if they had never been. Fast and smooth, his gun leaped up, bucked in his fist. The room rocked with noise. Flame lanced at him from twin muzzles and slugs picked at his sleeves, at his vest. Something licked hotly at the skin of his left arm.

Leavitt was down, spinning like a toe dancer and taking the wreck of a table with him to the floor. A slug took Considine squarely on the breastbone and the skinny renegade spilled on his back, his arms flung wide. His fingers scrabbled briefly in the sawdust, then were still.

A dazed, unbelieving silence held the room then, men staring open-mouthed as Stafford strode forward to inspect his kill. Satisfied, he thrust his gun into holster.

"Tend to them, some of you fellows." His hand indicated the two limp forms. "I've got business down the street."

He turned, walked out quickly. The crowd found its voice then and excited talk broke out behind him. But his mind was on Tom Ainslee and his steps hurried to get there. An hour later, he heard the doctor's verdict. "Barring complications —which are unlikely—he'll live."

They were sitting in the doctor's office, Stafford and Blake and gray-haired Beth Ainslee, with the wounded man lying quietly in the rear room.

Beth Ainslee put her handkerchief to her lips, her eyes filling with thankful tears. Blake puffed his pipe, smiling.

"He's a mighty tough rooster, that husband of yours, Beth," the doctor said.

"Could I see him for just a minute?"

The doctor assented. "Just one minute, Beth. But keep him quiet."

She stepped into the rear room, closed the door. Shortly she opened it again.

"He wants to see you, Bill," she said.

On the bed, the bandaged lawman looked up at the tall young fellow coming to stand beside him.

"Well, son?" he asked anxiously.

"Both of them," Stafford said simply, and held out his hands, thumbs down.

A slow grin widened Ainslee's lips. He lay silent a minute, then he brought out his question. "You—you figger you're ready now, son?"

Stafford nodded. He felt good. He had never felt so good in all his life. He drew a deep breath, and the star winked at him on his leather vest.

"I figger," said Bill Stafford.

A Novelet by

HENRY HALDEMAN

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A MAN TO TAKE

CHAPTER I

One Long Chance

THE PRISONER fidgeted, ill at ease in his seat. He felt the little sheriff's eyes upon him from the other side of the table.

To sit calmly in a regular eating house, to have a tall and lissome girl stand at his elbow to take his order—these were new and strange things to "Twist" Beagle, lean and long-limbed brushpopper that he was.

But he was catching on. He looked up at the girl, and his eyes were like the brown moss in deep mountain pools.

"Could you bring me that there pork and beans again, if you please, miss?" he asked.

Sheriff Harv Ryland Lets a Thief Catch a

Beagle put all he had into a flying leap

condensed from the Dec., 1946, Thrilling Western

WOLF TAMPLIN

The girl's serious face suddenly was wreathed in a smile. She was flushing as she turned to the older man, Sheriff Ryland, as if for reassurance.

"Just make it two, Milly," Ryland said and nodded approvingly.

His manner was casual, as if Milly didn't know that he had left a standing order for pork and beans the moment he learned what was his prisoner's favorite dish. He was like that, though there were some who said Harv Ryland would be good to his prisoners once too often.

As the girl fluttered away toward the kitchen, Twist Beagle's eyes followed her. They were still on her when she came back with the dinners.

After she had served them and gone back to the kitchen again, the sheriff and

Thief When Danger Hovers Over the Range!

his prisoner ate in thoughtful silence. Twist Beagle finally pushed back his dishes. When he had built a cigarette, his steady eyes leveled upon Harv Ryland.

"Sheriff," he said, "you ain't fooling me none. Lawmen don't take cow thieves to dinner with them every day, fatten them up, treat them like kings, without they got a reason. There's a joker in the deck somewheres."

The sheriff laughed, though he looked a little uneasy.

"Sure I got a reason," he said heartily. "I like good company when I eat. And—well, maybe I been wanting you to see how folks live on the other side of the fence. Maybe I've took to you, Twist. You're smart. Not meaning because you're good with a shooting iron, which you are. But because you're still better with your head, and you got an honest eye."

Twist Beagle's thin lips formed a half grin. The two were sitting in a private booth, and he made a gesture which took in this clean pleasant eating house to which the sheriff had been bringing him.

"I'm asking you a question, Sheriff," he said. "Will they treat me like this at State prison—like you're treating me here?"

Harv Ryland snorted, cleared his throat.

"Lord, no, feller. Not in that durn place."

IN THIS rambunctious community it took a good man to hold Sheriff Ryland's job, and Ryland was good. He was, in more ways than one. But sometimes things did get out of hand, as they had of late, when he found himself in a tight spot. Last week, in considering how he could straighten things out, he had wandered into the restaurant kitchen with his worries.

"Look, Milly," he had complained playfully, "just because you're waiting on a jail bird I been bringing in here for a danged good reason, you don't need to act like you're at a funeral, do you? Gosh, can't you smile at him once? Tell you what—I'll give you a big round dollar for every time you smile. Of course, you needn't overdo it."

Milly had not. Instead, she had acted more than ever as if she were attending a funeral. But the sheriff was not to be floored. He had other ways of pleasing his prisoner. And though Twist was a proud and mettlesome customer, Ryland contrived to get him into a barber shop, then to a clothing store.

And now here they were again at the restaurant for dinner. Even Ryland was a bit staggered at the change he saw in the harried, hard-faced youth of six weeks ago, whom the law had caught asleep with an exhausted herd of stolen cows. The two long-whiskered jaspers who had been with him had managed to hightail. But all along, the old-time sheriff had had an idea that the youngster was more sinned against than sinning.

Twist Beagle himself had been about stunned when he had stood up before the long mirror in the clothing store. Brand new levis, topped with a soft green-and-cream shirt, sure did make a fetching offset for his dark, "store-cut" hair. Beagle had just stood there grinning, running an amazed hand over his smooth, bleached cheeks from which the razor had taken a full inch of fine, scraggly beard.

"Probably his first town shave," Harv Ryland was thinking now. "Anyway, it snared a smile from Milly. She's earned herself a dollar, bless her heart."

But some of the healthy new color in Twist's face faded at what the sheriff said about the State prison.

"You don't quite get me, Twist," the little lawman said carefully. "Maybe there is a joker in the deck. You and me come here and we talk. Fact is, you've paid me back because you've learned me a heap of things."

"Like what?" Beagle was surprised.

"Twist, this county has got a lobo running loose."

"Wolf Tamplin!" Beagle said in a breathless whisper.

"Yeah—and I never knew you run with Tamplin for nigh onto a year—till you

told me yourself. Nor that you was with Tamplin when he looted the express at the Fishtail water tank—till you told me that too.

"That was a year ago," Twist said soberly. "I was plumb scared of Tamplin when he kept threatening to turn me over to the law for a rustling job I didn't do. But the folks I'd been working for thought I did, so I had to hightail—and wasn't nothing else to do, far as I could see but tie up with Wolf. Had to do whatever he said, looked like, but I quit him all right on account of that Fishtail business. He claimed it was a failure on account of me—because I wouldn't use my gun."

"Wouldn't exactly call it a failure—from Wolf's viewpoint," said the sheriff. "The dirty skunk got nine hundred out of that Fishtail robbery."

Twist Beagle's hands shook as he built a cigarette, though he did not speak.

"Twist," the sheriff went on, "I got an idea. You knowing Wolf Tamplin like you do, knowing his hideout and being onto his tricks like you are—if you and me was to bring Tamplin in, it might do you a heap of good when your trial comes up for being caught with them rustled cows."

"You mean I wouldn't have to go to prison—maybe could get me a job, live here in Splitrock town?"

The sheriff saw his prisoner's eyes go hungrily toward the kitchen door, through which Milly had passed. Ryland rose and reached for his hat.

"Come on feller," he said, "let's stretch our legs."

They walked back to the jail where Twist Beagle returned to his cell and sat down on his bunk.

"I got to project around town a little," Ryland told him. "When I get back, we'll talk some more."

After the sheriff left, Beagle sat and thought. He thought what a wide difference there was between places and people, between "Wolf" Tamplin in his hideout and a girl called Milly down at the restaurant. He had so many things to think about that it did not occur to Beagle that Harv Ryland had purposely given him this chance—just to think.

TWO hours later the sheriff was back, unlocking Beagle's cell door. They went to the office and sat across from each other at Ryland's flat-top desk. The sheriff drew out a few papers.

"I've got some descriptions of Tamplin here," he said. "I'd like to see what you think of them, Twist."

Harv Ryland read:

"He is over six feet tall, weighs about two hundred and forty pounds. He has a slight paunch, but don't be fooled by Tamplin's weight—he's cat-quick . . . He is a fluent talker, something of a scholar in his way. He is an outlaw by choice. He holds as interlopers all comers upon his domain, and stops at nothing to make good his claim . . . He likes to fish and trap. His craft and cunning make him highly dangerous—"

Beagle was chuckling.

"That reminds me. Wolf's favorite saying is that a buzzard couldn't bring a strange smell into Redhorse Gulch where he hangs out, without he'd know it before sundown."

"Twist," said the sheriff, "if you and me was to bring Tamplin in—well, I can't make promises, but I'm darn sure it would help you."

Beagle stirred uneasily.

"I've thought it over, Sheriff," he said. I'm against it. It wouldn't work. You wouldn't come home no more. Tamplin will shoot lawmen as far as he can read their brand. You've treated me white, Mr. Ryland. If I was to steer you into Redhorse Gulch, I'd have to hate myself the rest of my life."

Ryland stared in dumb surprise. Yet he knew that Beagle was right.

Redhorse Gulch, which Wolf Tamplin claimed as his own domain, was a wild mountain area saddled across the corners of three counties. Each of the other counties had sent in lawmen after Wolf, but the men never came back. Now both the other counties were throwing down the challenge to Splitrock. And Split-

rock voters were thinking the home county ought to call their hands.

Wherefore, Harv Ryland had figured out a plan for corralling Wolf Tamplin, and part of that scheme had included offering Milly a dollar each for her smiles, as hard pressed for cash as he was. But it had worked—and now he had what might be a far-reaching decision to make.

The sheriff caught his breath.

"And you, being with me, wouldn't come back either," he said, and nodded, as he looked up. But Twist, I see you got an idea. What is it?"

"Oh—I don't know." Twist shrugged. "Maybe I could bring Tamplin in—if I was to go it alone. But that wouldn't do either, me being a prisoner. Nothing to stop me from joining up again—with Tamplin."

Ryland seemed not to hear. He swung back in his chair.

"I wonder—" He was speaking to the ceiling. "Maybe here's the man for the job. Maybe I could fix it. Why if you was to take Wolf Tamplin, them cow stealing charges would just evaporate. This whole state would pretty near be writing songs about you, Twist Beagle."

The prisoner roused up, as if out of a dream.

"How soon can I start, Sheriff?"

"I'll saddle a horse," said Ryland and nodded, satisfied.

The moon had not yet risen when Twist Beagle was far out on the range, on his way. . . .

The region known as Redhorse Gulch was not properly a gulch at all, but a full seven miles of canyon, if measured by the little creek which took a snaky course through a maze of black and beetling mountains.

Beagle knew that he faced a life-and-death task, even if he were lucky enough to take Wolf Tamplin. He rode through the entrance to Redhorse on his third morning out from Splitrock. And all that day he spent in a slow, scouting advance.

Tamplin had a cabin of thick hewn logs, but that was far up at timberline. Beagle knew that the outlaw was apt to vary his habits with the seasons, moving down to deeply hidden camps, a snug natural cave or two. When these activities began to bore the man, he would sally out for some new deed of banditry. He seldom worked the same way twice. But the hazards of such a life were wine and meat to Wolf Tamplin.

Tamplin was known usually to keep with him one renegade underling as a companion and watch dog. This renegade was thought to be a man named "Mossy" Bollen, who probably had succeeded Twist Beagle when Twist had broken his bondage to Wolf.

NOT until Twist's second day in the gulch, when he had scouted more than half its length, did he encounter the first sign of human life. It was past noon and he was probing along a dark timbered slope. He had dismounted and crept down to a little point overlooking the creek bed, when the faint plunk of a rifle sounded from up the canyon.

As he crouched there listening, watching, a dozen deer came pelting down the grassy flat just under him. The flushed animals were slowing down and had all but passed him when the rearmost deer faltered, turned sharply toward the slope as if for shelter, then collapsed on the grass.

Beagle hesitated a moment, then plunged down to it. It was a meaty, two-point buck, shot through the lungs. He drew his sheath knife—a part of the fine new outfit Harv Ryland had lavished upon him—and slit the animal's throat. Its blood made a tell-tale blotch on the grass, and this he quickly covered, leaving the fresh earth to look as if the running herd had gouged it up.

He carried the deer back against the slope, in behind a thick hedge of cedars, then climbed up and brought his horse down. He made each move after a slow and careful surveillance. But no hunter appeared on the trail of the deer, which must have run about a mile after it had been shot.

Completely hidden from all angles,

Beagle hung up the two-pointer, deliberately dressed it out and flayed off the skin. He buried all the offal. He was elated. For he knew he would hardly dare to do any hunting on his own account, but he now had fresh meat which would be needed before he was through.

CHAPTER II

Lobo Trickster

IT WAS now mid-afternoon and Beagle was hungry. He had insisted on traveling light, carrying only the big tarp-covered roll lashed behind his saddle. He was facing this roll when some sound or a mere shadow caused him to whirl.

At the edge of the cedars, a dark bull-like figure stood with a rifle trained upon him at waist level. Beagle's stricken glance took in the high, nondescript laced boots, the beaklike nose and black eyes which lit the shadow under the man's black slouch hat.

Wolf Tamplin!

"Well, if it ain't my old friend Twister! Back to join Tamplin again, eh?"

Wolf's surprise was genuine. But his hearty manner quickly faded in the face of Beagle's bleak stare and threatening stance.

"Easy, feller," Wolf barked. "I see that gun of yours is making you nervous—I'll take it."

Beagle saw the outlaw's rifle steady, a finger stiffen on its trigger as Wolf moved forward. Twist turned grudgingly, in obedience to the weapon's prodding gestures, and allowed his belt gun to be plucked from its holster.

Tamplin stepped back, examined the gun briefly, then fired it rapidly three times into the hill slope.

"Nice gun, Twister," he commented. "Pretty outfit you got, too. And you've fatted up some. Must've made a good haul."

The outlaw's tone had changed to glib mockery. Beagle smothered his fury and chagrin.

"What I'd like to know, Tamplin," he said, "is how come you found me with this deer you shot?"

"You ought to know, feller. A buzzard can't bring a strange smell in here, without I know it before sundown. You did a sweet job, Twister, hiding that blood. But as I come poking down the creek, I see that a coyote had nosed it out.

"I watched him, and when he turns in here, thinks I, 'One of them big mountain cats has got my deer.' And here I find it's you. Mountain cat—maybe I was right!" His tone changed and he said wheedlingly, "You and me could pull off some big-time stuff, Twister. But get a fire going, boy! Let's eat. I'm starved."

"Tamplin," Beagle cut in, "you ain't fooling me. You've guessed it—I come in here to take you out. To the law."

"Oh-ho! Turned bounty hunter, eh? You figure I done you on that Fishtail job, so you allow to take it out of my hide. Out with it feller—how much they got on Wolf Tamplin's scalp?"

"How should I know, Tamplin?" Any matter of reward for Tamplin was a new idea to Beagle.

"I can tell you. Them rewards add up to four-five thousand dollars. Just like I thought, Twister—the John Laws are making a sucker out of you. Why don't they try it theirselves, I ask you? But no—they send you. If you're lucky, they get the bounty money. You standing for that?"

Tamplin broke off, cocking an ear. Beagle had to admit that the man's hearing sense was keener than his own.

"This way, Mossy!" the outlaw shouted without turning. "Come see what I caught!"

As Beagle had suspected, the outlaw's three pistol shots had been meant as a signal. A man appeared, leading two saddle horses, and Beagle got his first look at Mossy Bollen, Tamplin's watch dog and all round chore-man. He was a quick-moving, waddling runt of a man with fuzzy hair and washed-out blue eyes.

Twist had heard that Bollen was supposed to be not "all there" in his head.

Having noted Beagle's pack, Tamplin ordered Bollen to take it down and undo it. As the coffee, sugar, flour and parcels of ham and bacon, dried meat and fruits were dumped out on the ground, the outlaw's eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

Beagle fumed inwardly at sight of his cans of pork and beans, recalling Harv Ryland's happy grin when he had brought these in, a special remembrance, and stacked them on the desk over which the two had been working out their plan.

"Go get the pack-horse, Mossy," Tamplin directed.

Beagle recalled that the outlaw had had certain secret contacts outside, through which he got supplies. But when Bollen brought the pack-horse, Twist noted that its greasy canvas panniers were empty, that long cords were coiled about the pack-saddle forks.

Instantly he drew the conclusion that Tamplin had been on his way after a new stock of grub. Clearly, his own assorted tidbits looked good to the outlaws.

AFTER more irascible commands that kept Mossy Bollen on the jump, Beagle's grub was loaded into the panniers and all the horses led out into the open. Tamplin gave orders to mount. He had transferred Beagle's scabbard to his own saddle and himself rode a rigid guard on his former associate.

They crossed the creek and turned back up the gulch. Tamplin was impatient, more alert, seeming to have changed his first notion about a fire.

After only a mile, the gulch widened into a long flat, its open margins soft with meadow sod. Its middle was one vast jungle of willow brush and beaver dams.

To avoid this obstacle, the trail slanted up the right-hand slope. Two hundred yards up its first steep pitch, the group halted on a small flat ledge.

"Here's where we eat," Tamplin announced. "Take the horses, Mossy. Tie them short, then rustle some wood. Twister, dang you, you can get that fire going now. Me, I'm settling down here to see that you step easy and mind your eyes."

Tamplin eased himself to a boulder, spinning his belt gun pointedly on a finger. Beagle set about his task, careful to make no sudden moves. The idea suited him. The outlaws could be no hungrier than he was.

But he also realized that he was in a tough spot, and if he were to get out of it, it would be up to him alone. For before starting out on this venture to earn his freedom, Beagle not only had had difficulty in convincing Harv Ryland that it would be suicide for two lawmen to come together, but in their last talk, he had made the sheriff promise not to come to his aid.

"If I get Wolf Tamplin, I'll bring him back," Beagle had said. "If I don't come back, just mark Tamplin up with another killing and let it go at that."

Now Beagle was wondering. Suppose he didn't get back? Would Harv Ryland believe he had died doing his duty? And even if Ryland himself did believe that, how many of the county's voters would argue that the sheriff had simply allowed a prisoner to slip through his fingers?

But Harv Ryland must have realized the gamble he was taking!

At first, Beagle had pictured two alternatives—either to bring Tamplin back, or die trying. Now he saw other angles to his problem. And he also considered his situation and his present surroundings.

Years before, Redhorse Gulch had teemed for a brief interval with gold mining activities. Up at its head, where a bald mountain wall blocked it off, had been the thriving town of Deadend. Up the face of this steep wall, above timberline on rocky switchback trails long since impassable, were the shafts, tunnels and shell-like housings which had made the town possible.

All this was stripped and lifeless now. Deadend was not even a ghost city, for no more than two structures were left

to tell the story of its rampaging past.

One of these was the hewn log cabin in which Wolf Tamplin made his hide-out home. The other was the best-built structure of which that now forgotten city had boasted—its jail. A squat cubicle of great stone blocks with a door made from discarded wagon tires, straightened, meshed together and rudely welded, the ancient calaboose had still been usable the last time Beagle had seen it.

He was not fooling himself. He was Tamplin's prisoner despite the big outlaw's show of good feeling. In truth, it was from Tamplin's gloating eyes that Beagle got his first hint that he was headed for the old jail—unless he could see his way to rejoin Tamplin on the owl-hoot trail.

Which would be worse—to go to State prison, or to be Wolf Tamplin's captive behind the bars of that dismal relic among the ghosts of a forgotten city?

"When did you eat last, Twister?" Tamplin queried.

Beagle, having cut steaks from the loins of the deer, under Tamplin's instructions, was broiling them over the fire. He was meeting his captor's half-mocking banter cheerfully.

"Me, I've been living good, Tamplin. Say, if I ain't forgot, you like your meat pretty well burnt. Is that right?"

Tamplin laughed. Beagle got the broiling steaks adjusted and stood up to rub the smoke from his eyes. As he stepped a little out from the fire, Tamplin swung warily to face him. The powerful outlaw held a snorting contempt for the idea that any one man could take him prisoner.

"I've camped here before, Twister," he said. "This shelf we're on is part of the old ore road of forty years ago. Tip-top lookout, ain't it? Me and you, Twister, could stand off a dozen lawhounds here. Me, I could hold three-four lawdogs right here—and make them work for me." Tamplin laughed.

THE campfire was built near the up-rising cut of the old road. The shelf's outer edge dropped off in a sheer cliff which extended for fifty yards in either direction. Beagle walked to the cliff edge and stood overlooking the wide creek bottom.

It was one of those fair sights which look good to a man who faces death. A few yards out from the cliff face, a dozen fir trees sent up their sleek tapers from below. As Beagle looked down into their tops, a morbid memory came to him. Only a few years ago, he had been a gay-hearted boy, prospecting for crow eggs, for young squirrels, or just climbing trees for the sheer joy of it. That was before he had lost his parents and had been forced to strike out on his own, working for folks who didn't trust him when it came to a showdown.

He was rudely roused from this moment of reverie. Like an evil shadow, Wolf Tamplin had moved up behind him, to jab him playfully in the ribs with his gun. He thrust his face down to Beagle's ear.

"You couldn't work it, son," he chuckled sardonically. "It's a fifty-foot jump down there. You'd bust your neck."

Beagle glanced down, then up, in bewilderment.

"Gosh, Wolf, have you gone loco? I'm just thinking. Listen, Wolf. If I was to join you again, if I was to give you my fair word, what would I get out of it?"

"Sh'sh. Not so loud. Mossy's heard about you, and he's plumb jealous. He'd plug you in a minute if I'd let him."

Bollen was twenty yards down the grade, busy with the saddle cinches. Beagle again looked thoughtfully out into the treetops, then shrugged and returned to his fire. With his back to the grade cut, he squatted again to his cooking. Tamplin remained standing, facing him across the fire.

The outlaw had broken a boot lace. He lifted his foot to tug at the lace with both hands. From under his hat, Beagle could just see Tamplin's legs and hands, his six-gun dangling on one finger by its trigger guard.

Quick as a chipmunk, Beagle leaped straight over the fire. He caught Tamplin under the raised knee, belting his shoul-

der against the man's big body. The body collision was badly aimed, but even so he heaved Tamplin up and tumbled him back. As the big outlaw's shoulders struck hard upon the ground he bawled an alarm to Bollen.

Beagle plunged on over him. With a running start to the cliff edge, he put all he had into a clean leap into that fifty feet of space.

The bend of his right arm fell true against one of the fir tops. The tree swayed violently, but held. Beagle's flying body whipped round to its off side, his legs falling astraddle of the tree's soft "bush."

Clutching limb ends with his hands, while lower limb ends swept up through the crotch of his legs, he slid swiftly down over the outflaring fir. The trick was not a difficult one. He had done it many times before, though never with such a pounding heart.

Tamplin quickly flopped over onto his elbow and fired twice into the fir. But so swift was Beagle's drop into the fir's soft bush, that both shots passed above him. After that, he was on the ground, hidden by the tree's base.

Concealed by other trees, Beagle whipped back under the cliff and there tried to listen, with his blood roaring in his ears. He heard an excited shout from Bollen, then the plop-plop of Bollen's belt gun.

Tamplin seemed to join Bollen, then both were shouting and firing together. Beagle decided that his threshing descent must have flushed some animal, maybe a bird, whose quick passage through the brush must have deceived Bollen.

CHAPTER III

The Wolf Turns Cat

TWIST BEAGLE listened for Tamplin's command, which would bring the outlaws down to close in on him from two sides. To his surprise, he heard them running down the trail together, still on the trail of their false clue.

Beagle grinned widely. He skittered along the cliff the opposite way, rounded it, climbed the slope and crouched at the edge of the old ore road. Along it, he could see the campfire, the idle horses. He ran softly down past the fire to the horses and caught his rifle from its scabbard on Tamplin's saddle.

He even had time to find his belt and six-gun hidden under a stone, and still came the outlaw's voices from as far down as the creek level. He stepped back to the fire, got a venison chop and began tearing it with his teeth. Then he slipped down past the horses, hugging the cut side of the ruined ore road. At the brow of the road's steepest pitch, he ducked into a perpendicular wash and there finished his chop.

Presently, the outlaws were returning up the trail, hurrying back for their horses.

"He's still in the brush under the cliff," Tamplin was panting. "Keep watching, Mossy. If he tries for a break across that streak of meadow, we'll let him have it!"

Beagle leaned out, presenting only his head and leveled rifle.

"So that's the tune, Tamplin!" he jeered. "Let him have it right now if you feel like it."

Bollen showed his yellow streak. As both men halted, Mossy ducked behind Tamplin, his hand moving gunward. Beagle fanned the ears of both men with a single shot and Tamplin struck angrily back at Bollen with his empty hand.

"Bollen, I'll give you one more chance," Beagle called out. "The same goes for you, Wolf."

Wolf Tamplin spouted curses, but his hands went up.

"Bollen," Twist Beagle barked, "take the big boy's gun—from behind. That's right. Now drop it. Drop your own alongside of it."

Mossy Bollen was good at taking orders, and when Beagle had ceased pouring them at him, Wolf Tamplin lay on

the ground, well done up in packsaddle twine. Beagle moved him to the fire with Bollen's help, after which he fitted a pair of short rope hobbles to Bollen's ankles. He searched both men and tied their belts, guns and rifles into a snug bundle.

"You like your meat pretty well burnt, eh, Wolf?" Beagle grinned. "Well, it ought to do. We'll go on with our eating now."

"Cocky, ain't you?" Tamplin snarled. "But you ain't got us out of here yet."

"No. But the law's got a long reach, Tamplin, and I'm on its side. Your days are done."

"You know what I'd have done," Bollen bitterly and meaningfully reminded the helpless Tamplin.

Twist Beagle had a problem on his hands. Only an hour remained of daylight and it was a two-day trek to Splitrock. He decided to stay where he was until morning, only moving down to the meadow where the horses could be staked to grass. With Bollen's aid, he accomplished the task without mishap.

The stars came out and the high thin air turned bitter with frost. But there was plenty of wood which Beagle brought in between his intervals of restive pacing. Before the first hint of dawn, he had a huge breakfast cooked and again the ill-assorted trio ate and drank hot coffee with gusto.

Then Beagle untied Bollen, down to his rope hobbles and set him to readying the horses. He stowed all his grub into Tamplin's panniers. He next got Tamplin aboard, tied his feet under the horse's belly, then did the same for Bollen. He tied the right hand of each outlaw with a cord to the cinch ring.

"If you toe the line," Beagle proffered, "I'll maybe do better by you, once we're clear of Redhorse."

He topped the pack-saddle with his tarp roll, the deer carcass, and the tight bundle of outlaw firearms. The packhorse was a slow, waddling brute, and to that stolid animal Beagle tailed the outlaw's mounts—three in a string.

[*Turn page*]

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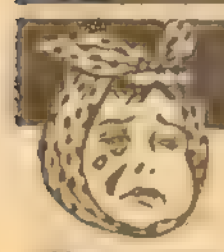

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AFTER a final careful survey of all details, he turned to his own horse. The animal was in high fettle and snorty with cold. As Beagle stepped into saddle, the horse cracked into a bucking fit. Beagle was prepared for this playful demonstration, but at that moment the loud, blood-chilling wail of a catamount shivered the still dawn.

The effect of the cry on Tamplin's pack-horse was electric. The logy beast went wild. It snapped its tail tie and whipped the lead rope from Beagle's saddle-horn. From it, Beagle's mount took genuine fright and bolted into a high run.

He heard a raucous laugh, then from Tamplin's lungs again that high mimic cry shook loose the canyon echoes. Both bolting horses headed—not down the canyon, but up it, toward the ghost of Deadend. Before Beagle could stop his mount, he had been carried half a mile.

By the time he had gained the upper hand and was returning, he met the pack-horse, which he had passed. At that first devilish cry from Tamplin, Beagle had seen the pack-horse, true to its native instincts, dash under the low branches of a tree. The deer, tarp roll and bundle of firearms all had been swept off.

"He must have been jumped by one of them cats when he was a colt," Twist Beagle decided.

He touched steel to his mount and in a moment was again in sight of his prisoners. An end of the broken pack cord must have remained caught in the tree. Despite his handicaps, Tamplin had worked the outlaw mounts close enough to grasp the dangling pack cord and was at this moment drawing the bundle of guns up from the ground.

He got a turn of the cord about his saddle-horn, then swung the horses. After their first steps, they shied into a scared run with the tarp roll and deer carcass bounding crazily at their heels.

Even so, the horses were still tailed together and Beagle gained rapidly. Then, Tamplin got a belt gun wrested free and managed to open fire, awkwardly. The play looked hopeless, yet some evil god

smiled on the outlaw. One of his first shots took Beagle's horse in the shoulder.

He heard the drum of the heavy slug, heard it sheer off past his own head. Instantly he was kicking free of the saddle. His horse faltered, then somersaulted into a patch of brush.

Beagle got clear, but his horse lay limp with a broken neck. Tamplin waved back with a mocking hoot.

It was still possible to stop the outlaw with a couple of long shots, so Beagle ran and jerked his rifle from the tangled saddle.

Its beautiful slim, blue barrel was bent like a bow!

Twist Beagle stood, gulping, in the half-dawn. Ten minutes before, he had been riding high to success; now he was afoot in the heart of Wolf Tamplin's territory with only a belt gun and a hunting knife.

The outlaws were soon out of sight along the crooked brush line, but were sure to be after him the moment they could get themselves untied and organized.

Beagle clutched his ruined rifle and ran up-canyon toward the pack-horse. He easily caught the winded animal by its dragging lead rope, though the horse itself was no good to him. He whipped the lightly loaded panniers from the saddle forks, tossed them into the willows and swung back to tie up the pack-horse. But as his glance lifted, he saw the outlaws pounding after him, already free of their ties.

He dropped the lead rope and ducked for the willows. The outlaws opened fire, their rifle steel biting and ripping the brush around him. The willows grew low and dense, bent and canopied by blanketing snows. Beagle flattened, crawling along narrow beaver runs, dragging the canvas panniers after him. He quickly changed his course to avoid the boring lead, and soon could stop to listen.

The shooting ceased. The willow thicket was scarcely two hundred yards across though several times that long. Beagle heard Tamplin shout at Bollen to stay where he was then gallop down to where

[*Turn page*]

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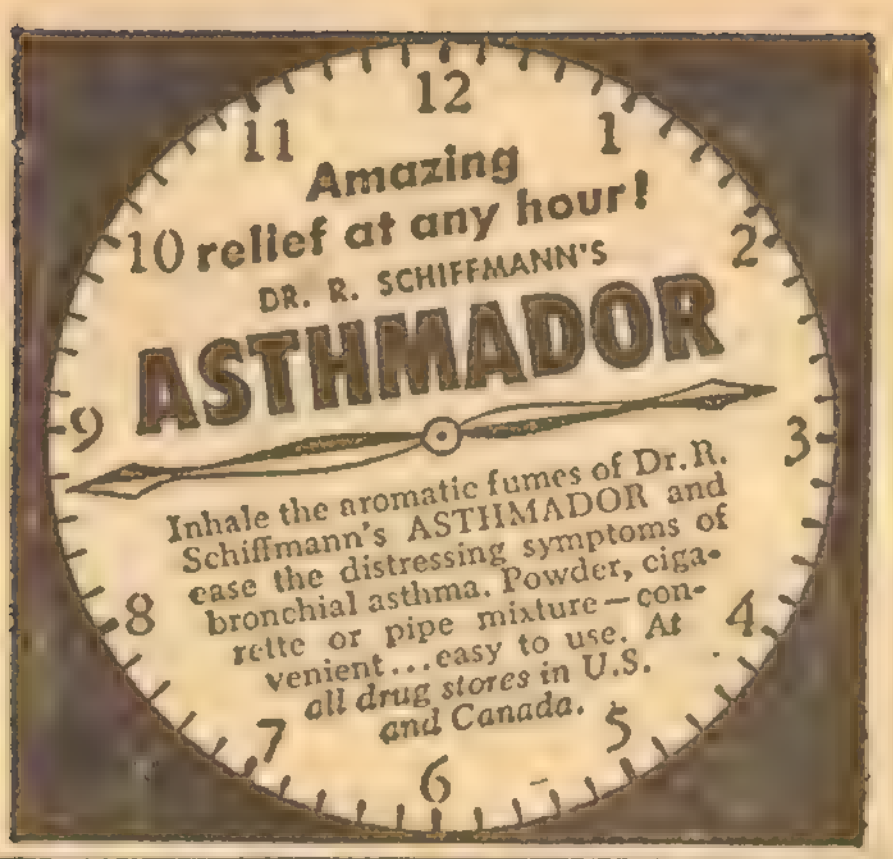
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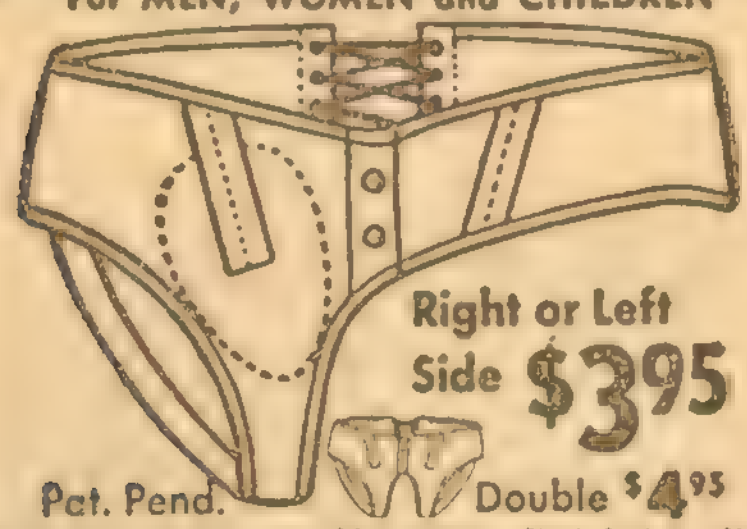

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he could cross the creek and get around the willows.

Twist grinned.

"Go it, feller," he muttered. "The two of you will have a sweet job hunting me out of here."

He dropped the useless rifle and pushed on with the panniers.

THE soft ground grew marshier. He ran into bottomless ooze and trod along sodden logs. He climbed out on a big beaver dam half circled by water, and now could hear Tamplin calling across to Bollen from the far side. Gaining that end of the dam, Beagle hung his grub bags on a tree stub and pushed on for a sight of Tamplin.

As the sun climbed the sky, Wolf Tamplin's temper rose with it. For hours the outlaws shouted back and forth and pounded sod around the marshy jungle. For hours Beagle probed its bosky depths. The die was cast. It was now war to a finish.

Once he laid in wait, got a perfect shot at Tamplin—and missed. The spookiness of it made him shiver. But ten minutes later he was across the thicked, throwing a long shot at Bollen. Late in the afternoon, he failed in another fair shot at Tamplin and got his clothes gouged at the belt by a rifle slug.

By these tactics, Beagle hoped to keep the outlaws on their horses until nightfall. He dared not push the battle, since the moment they found he was reduced to a belt gun, they could close in on foot and whittle him down with rifle fire.

As night began to come, Beagle found near the beaver dam a freakish, waist-high table of dry, rocky ground, left by the wash of the creek which now flowed on its inner side. To this dry flat he climbed with his panniers. The sky was clouding.

"Smells like rain." he shivered. "Wonder if I dare build a fire."

The bit of rock table was no larger than a band stand. A growth of fir which crowded against its high side opposite the creek insured its concealment. But as

Beagle noted the low clouds, he saw they would reflect light like a ceiling.

He ate smoked ham, cold, with dry biscuits. Then stowing all his grub into one pannier, he stuffed the other with small dry wood, such as would burn without smoke.

For two miserable hours, he hung in black darkness near the beaver dam, with only his ears to guard him. But now the beavers were out, playing and working with their winter food. Their stealthy noises, their splashings, the sudden spat of their broad tails, like pistol shots, set Twist's nerves on edge.

Shivering, craving action, he groped out to the meadow at the far side. If he could get one more fair chance with his six-gun! If he could once lay hold of Tamplin's fine mount! The outlaws must have some kind of camp. Their horses had to eat, and so did they.

He moved like a slow shadow until he had circled the whole upper half of the willows, then on down past his camp of the night before. At the thicket's lower end, he found his tarp roll, badly snagged, just where the outlaws must have stopped to get themselves untied.

Beagle held out his hands, muttering in dismay. It was snowing!

CHAPTER IV

The Law's Long Reach

SHOULDERING his tarp roll, Twist Beagle carried it far enough to conceal it within the willow thicket, then kept on until he had completed a full circuit of the jungle. Still there was no sign or sound. In the snowy darkness, he could not find where he had left the willows. Two inches of snow lay on the meadow and Beagle shivered with cold and hunger when the light of another day showed him the way back to the beaver dam.

To his vast relief, he found the panniers

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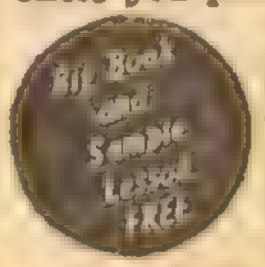

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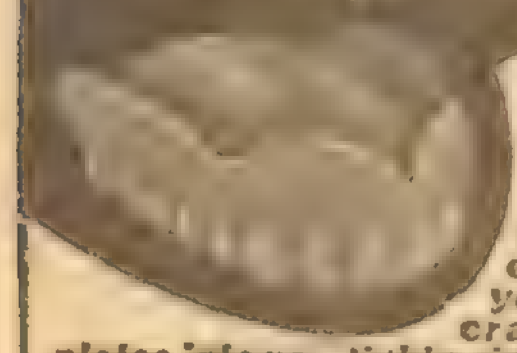

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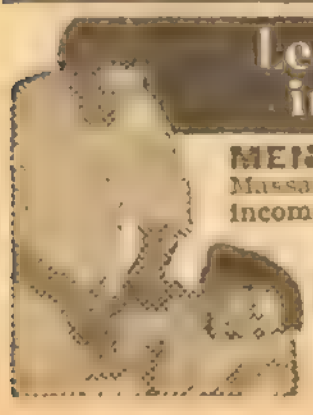

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just as he had left them. He shook them free of snow and hauled out the first grub that came to his hand. It was a can of pork and beans, and it brought a grin to Beagle's face. He felt better—as if Harv Ryland was still remembering him.

Without hesitation now, Beagle laid his can of pork and beans on the ground, covered it with small wood and set the wood afire. It was still snowing, so smoke would not show, even if there were anyone to see it.

With numb fingers, he groped for the empty can he had saved for heating water. There on his heels, he abruptly froze as something poked him solidly from behind. A shivering snarl held him still.

"If you move a muscle, I'll blow you in two! Hey Mossy, come running. I got the slippery devil!"

Over his shoulder, Beagle could glimpse Wolf Tamplin's head and shoulders, thrusting out of the firs above the rock table edge. He swore fervently at his own faulty reasoning.

"Unbuckle your belt!" Tamplin's ugly tone brooked no delay and Beagle complied.

Tamplin was a sight—covered with mud, drenched below the waist, blue and quaking with cold.

"What you got to heat water in?" he demanded. "Get out that coffee."

Beagle found the cloth bag of coffee.

"You had a frying pan, Wolf," he said. "I reckon it got lost. I—"

He seemed to stammer with an eagerness to please. Actually he was seeing a chance for himself, a thin and fearful one, but a chance. He prayed that Mossy wouldn't come for another two minutes. Three minutes!

He laid the last of his own wood on the fire, found the empty tin he had been hunting. He turned a block of stone close against the fire.

"What's that for?" Tamplin roared in instant suspicion.

He subsided when Twist placed the empty tin in readiness upon the stone. He shouted loudly at Mossy. Mossy came.

He clambered up and squatted over the fire, teeth chattering like castanets.

"Don't be sitting," Tamplin raged. "Take this fellow's belt—there it lays—and tie his legs, while I—"

With a thunderous clap the fire exploded like a volcano. Beagle, crouched behind his rock, saw Tamplin's hat fly back, his face blot out in a blast of flame and ashes. Beagle uncoiled, diving twice his length sideward. Tamplin's two guns cut loose like an echo. Bollen had tumbled straight backward, off his heels. Beagle saw him scrambling half up, clawing for his gun.

TWIST was dodging round the runty Bollen, aiming to make a jump for the willows, when Bollen abruptly went slack and again fell back, his six-gun tumbling behind him. In one long, springy glide, Beagle whipped in behind him, scooped up Bollen's gun and swung it against Tamplin's bare head.

Tamplin's hands flew limply up and he collapsed backward onto Beagle's feet. Twist looked down into the big outlaw's face. It was plastered thickly with a steaming brown paste peppered with ashes. Beagle drew a shaky breath and laughed insanely.

Bollen lay groaning. One of Tamplin's blind shots had hit him.

When Tamplin opened his eyes, Beagle was pouring water over his blistered face, washing it clean.

"I knew you was up to something," Tamplin growled.

"I saw you did," said Beagle. "But the beavers didn't tell you I had a can of beans in the fire. That's a trick you maybe never learned, Tamplin. The sheriff, he put me onto it. You can heat your can pronto, that way and with mighty little fire. But it's worse than a steam boiler. It'll blow you to kingdom come if you don't watch it. You wouldn't blame me for pushing that rock up in front of me, would you, Tamplin?"

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steady riding lay behind Twist Beagle and now he was plodding over open and rolling rangeland.

He was riding Wolf Tamplin's blooded bay gelding. Tamplin rode at his left on Mossy Bollen's wobbling cowpony, while the body of Bollen rode the logy pack-animal along with Beagle's snagged tarp roll.

Two hours ahead lay Splitrock. Straining his eyes in that direction as he rode, at length he made out the silhouette of a horseman on the jutting step of a commanding mesa. As he suspected, the figure turned out to be that of Harv Ryland, watching for him. A half-hour later, Ryland pounded up on a lathered horse, wearing a grin so wide he could scarcely speak.

"Darn, Twist—you've traded horses! Traded a dead one for a live one, I bet!"

"Sheriff—er—Ryland, meet Mr.—er—Tamplin." Twist Beagle managed to say. "Old friend of mine, sort of."

Wolf Tamplin was not a good loser. He nodded sourly.

WHEN they came out of the jail, the sheriff flung up a hand to greet the gathering crowd. Clamor broke out.

"Gosh, Twist," he said, "we'll have to climb our horses or we'll never make it uptown. I bet you could eat!"

They dropped rein at the restaurant and went inside, with Ryland still chattering.

"Milly," said Ryland, "meet the new deputy sheriff. He'll be on steady from now on. Twist, what you going to have? No pork and beans for breakfast."

"If you ever say pork and beans to me again—but wait till I tell you. Milly, he thinks I caught Wolf Tamplin. Well, it wasn't me—it was Harv Ryland. Wait till I tell you about it."

"How would some ham and eggs go?" Milly said. "A double order? I'll cook them for you myself."

"Sure enough?" Twist Beagle brightened. "I couldn't think of anything better. Make it ham and eggs."

"Make it two," said Harv Ryland.

—Continued from Back Cove

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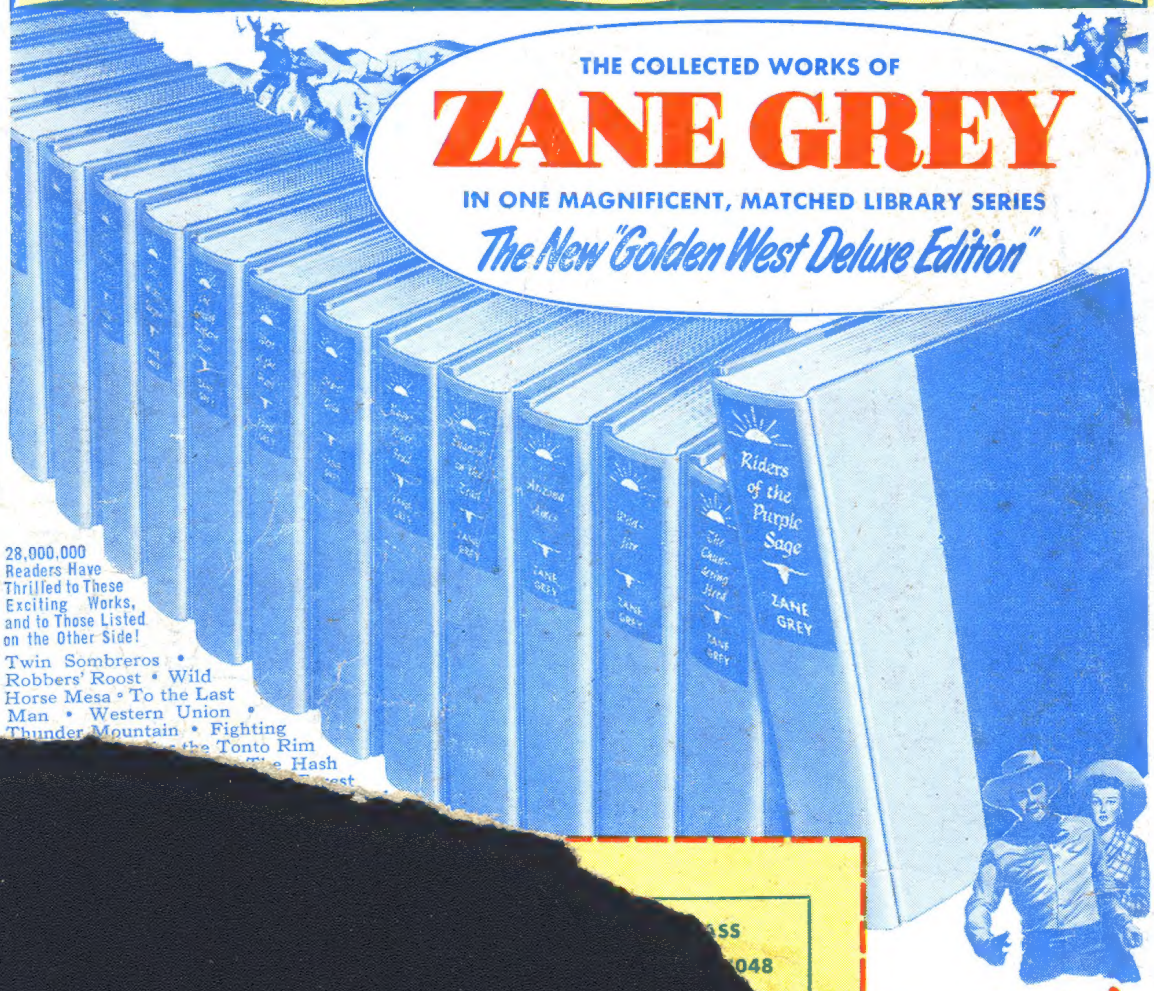

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